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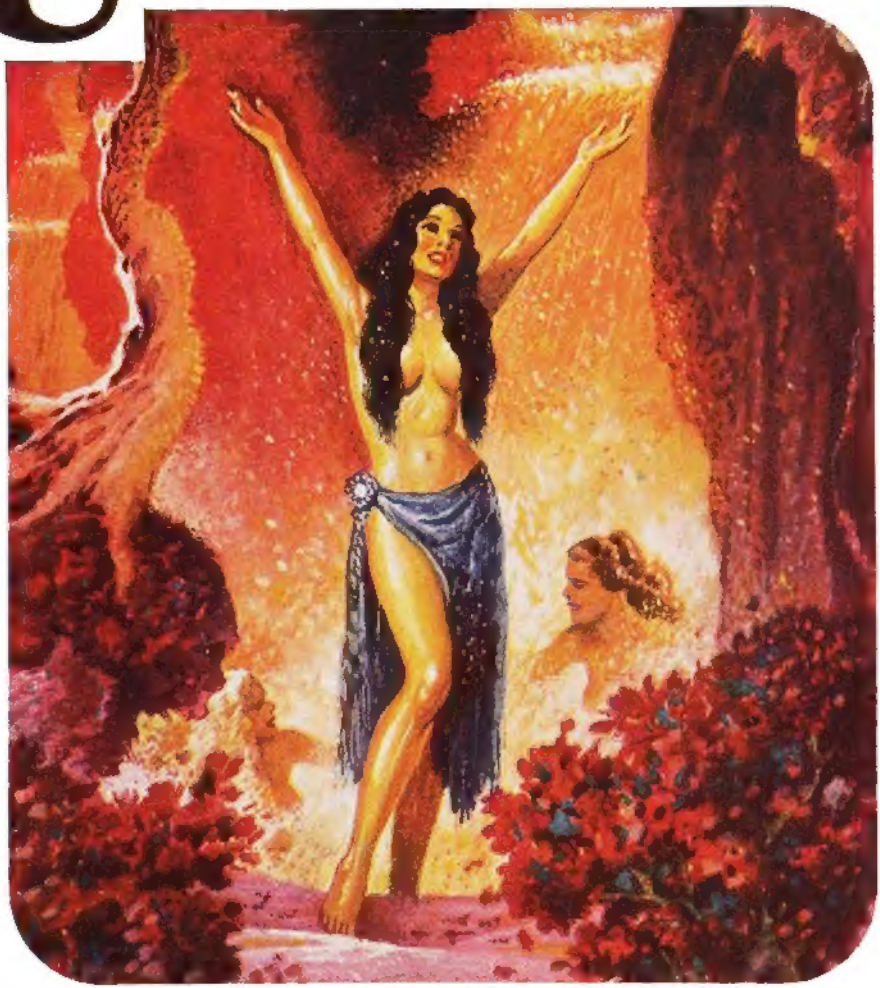

Another Tedric Story by EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

THE DOOR by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

The Man With The Broken Nose by Wilson O. Clough

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Universe SCIENCE FICTION

Issue #4

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Published bi-monthly by PALMER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1144 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Illinois. Second-class entry applied for at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois. Additional entry applied for at Evanston, Illinois and Amherst, Wisconsin. All reasonable care will be taken but we assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts and artwork.

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....Editorial...

FIFTEEN years ago, on February 14, 1938 to be exact, your editor began the preparation of his first magazine—and began to miss his first deadline! February 24 was the day on which pages were due for final okay, and on the following morning the printers would start making the printing plates. Right then and there I discovered to my horror that I'd *forgotten* to write the editorial! Yes, I had all the stories, all the illustrations, all the features, everything that goes to make up the content of the magazine—but I'd clean forgotten the first page in the book!

Do you know what the cardinal commandment of magazine publishing is? It's cardinal all right because it ought to be blazoned on the wall in front of every editor in *red*, because if it is disobeyed the red on the wall is likely to be the crimson of your blood, and 50% docked from your paycheck for years to come! Briefly, it is: "Thou Shalt Not Miss The Deadline!"

Why is this so important? Well, let's say the magazine prints one million copies. It is on sale four weeks. It sells 920,000 copies, not a good sale, but a fair percentage considering. . . . Now, if the editor misses the deadline, and the magazine is ten days late, we have a shortening of the on-sale period and a loss of one-third of the sale. This, if you can divide, 920,000 trisected by 3 is 306,666⅔.

Since the publisher makes 22 cents per copy, this means a net loss of $67,466.66, and if you deduct 50% of the editor's salary ($250 monthly) in order to make up the loss he has caused, it means that it will take approximately 45 years for the editor to pay for his mistake and reimburse his publisher.

Well, your editor will have to work for half-salary for 45 more years, because he's just missed the deadline again! After all these years you'd think he'd have his lesson learned!

One of the worst things about having to write a deadline—editorial is that you can never think of anything to say. Consequently, every time you read an editorial that doesn't make sense, you will know that the editorial is a deadline editorial. This makes almost all the editorials we've ever read deadline editorials. It must be the truth, because to ascribe them to anything else would be a calumny of the worst sort. To say nothing of uncharitable. And if you've found anything sensible in this edi-

torial so far, it's amazing.

In addition to having to write without benefit of inspiration, it is necessary to write 156 lines of 32 characters so that when the typesetter sets it up, it will come out so as to fill the pages left blank exactly, and thus made it unnecessary to waste more time making corrections, having new proofs pulled, and spending more time in the mail.

What usually happens is that the typesetter, in sheer perversity, suddenly decides he will "air out" his letter-spacing for once, and consequently, for the first time in the history of the magazine there are only 28 characters per line, and you find yourself with 19 lines too much. This means a delay of three days more, and 15 more years working for half pay.

The terrifying thing about it is the way it builds up. Just a mere oversight becomes a catastrophe, It overwhelms you. It crushes you, leaves you shattered on the floor in front of the publisher, blubbering for "just one more chance!"

It's so very much like the situation the world finds itself in today, that it should make all of you who are reading this sit down and begin to think it over.

In 1945 the Great Publisher decided to put out a History of Mankind, and having finished it all except the last chapter, He set a deadline for the author (Mankind, because they are writing their own history). We go to press very soon now, He said. That last chapter will have to be at the Armageddon Typesetting Company by 1955, because by 1966 the Presses of the Grapes of Wrath Printing Company will start rolling.

The deadline is terribly close. If the Publisher doesn't get his book out on time, it will LOSE MONEY, and he'll be bankrupt. Which means he won't be able to publish a sequel. Which would be the end of the characters.

We haven't much time. We've got to bring the BOMB problem in our plot to a solution. We've got to end our story one way or another. Are we going to have a happy ending, or are we going to have a sad one? Or, worse still, are we going to miss the deadline and lose everything by default?

You might wonder why we put LOSE MONEY in caps? Well, that's what we do everything for, in this world; we want to make Money. We establish a "plan," and then we proceed to carry it out. We call our "magazine" a monthly. We make a "deadline" a necessity.

Do you know how much an H-bomb costs? Do you know how much the gadgets we call "civilization" cost? Now, with the DEADLINE staring us in the face, the price is too much. It just isn't worth (Typesetter's note: What'll I do with the rest of this type?)

By Eric Frank Russell

THE DOOR

This is a "once upon a time" story about a fairy princess and a very young knight. Although he grew up to ride a space ship instead of a white charger, like the knights of old he went on a quest for — The Door.

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

WELL, dear, I don't know that I really ought to. Maybe you aren't interested in a story at all. Maybe you're merely seeking an excuse to stay up a bit longer because you don't want to go to bed just yet. You should go to bed at your proper time if you want to grow up a beautiful lady.

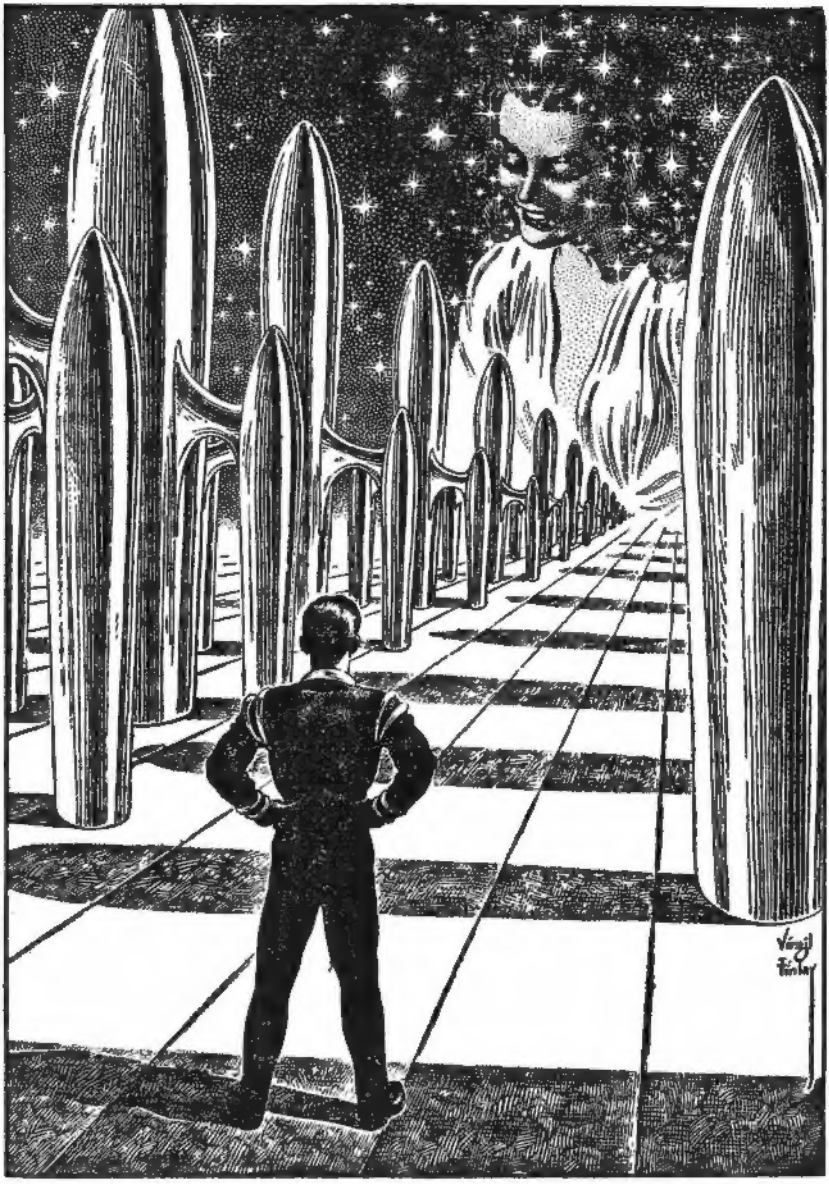
Don't I like you? Now there's a ridiculous question! Of course I do. I like you a lot. In fact I love you more than words can tell. There's a special reason but it's a big secret. No, I won't tell you the reason. If I did it wouldn't be my secret any more. Besides, you're hardly old enough to understand.

What, you'll be ten next month? My, you are growing a big girl. I'd give everything I possess to have a girl like you. Why haven't I? You do ask the most awkward questions. You see, dear, it's like this: a man can't be a Daddy and have a pretty little girl when for years and years and years he's far away among the stars. That is one of the pleasures he must give up, one of the sacrifices he has to make.

If men were not denied such things or find them placed beyond reach there would be none of them out there in the silent dark. But the ships shoot long and their flames blaze wide because men will grasp at the stars when they have nothing nearer and dearer to hold.

Perhaps it's just as well.

Perhaps.



". . . men will grasp at the stars when they have nothing nearer and dearer to hold."

Anyway, I came round here to visit your Mummy, to chat with her a little while and find out how she's doing. We're old friends, you know. And now that I have seen her I feel it's time for me to go. I don't think I ought to stay longer even to tell you a story.

Now don't jig up and down like that. Tell you what, let's ask Mummy if I may. If she says no then off to bed you go like a good girl. I'll say goodbye and be on my way . . . back . . . into the eternal night.

H'm! you certainly know how to get what you want, don't you? Who's boss in this house, you or your mother? All right then, I'll tell you a story but I mustn't keep you up too long. I'll take this chair and you can sit on my lap and Mummy can hear the story too while she does her sewing.

Comfortable now? That's right, snuggle up to me, get yourself settled and don't interrupt once I'm properly started. It spoils a story to keep answering questions.

What sort of a yarn would you like to hear? About fairies, pirates, space-rovers or what? Fairies are old-fashioned and out-of-date? Who on earth told you so silly a thing as that? They aren't, dear, they aren't. Fairies have been and always will be as modern as this minute.

Listen now, just to prove it I'll tell you a story about a fairy princess and a space-rover and it will be really true. Yes, really and wonderfully true.

Did I squeeze you hard when I said that? I'm very sorry. I didn't realize what I was doing. You didn't mind me squeezing, did you? Sometimes people do things without knowing it.

Anyway, let's get started otherwise Mummy will be hustling you upstairs before I'm through. I'll tell you a tale about a fairy princess and a man who went among the stars. It is true and sweet and I hope you'll like it. We must have a name for it. What'll we call it? I know, we'll call it *The Door.*

* * *

ONCE upon a time there was a man whom we shall call the Man because his name doesn't matter in the least. But at the time this story starts he was no more than a boy. He was exactly sixteen years and two months old.

Late one sunny Saturday afternoon he was returning home after fishing in a little stream. He came out of a woodland path onto the main road and saw two young girls walking ahead of him. One of these was the daughter of his next-door neighbors whom, of course, he knew very well. The other girl lived somewhere not far away though as yet he had seen her only at a distance and never close up.

Naturally he hurried a bit to catch up and have company on his way. They heard him coming, glanced around, stopped and waited for him. He nodded in a friendly manner at the girl from next door,

said, "Hello, Sally." She nodded back and introduced her friend.

At that point he turned his head to acknowledge the other girl, looked right into her eyes and was thunderstruck to see clearly and beyond all doubt that she wasn't an ordinary girl at all. She was a fairy princess with eyes far brighter than the stars.

Moreover, to place the matter beyond all dispute, the fairy princess put a spell upon him the instant he looked at her. He found himself momentarily unable to speak. His legs went weak, his fingers could hardly hold his rod and basket and all his insides went sort of fizzy while he stood and gaped at her without saying a word.

So long and hard did he stare that the fairy princess registered a tender blush and her eyes became brighter than ever. Taking the other girl's arm she cancelled part of the spell and the three walked slowly along.

Pretty soon they reached adjoining houses where the fairy princess would have to leave them and continue to her own home alone. And there the Man who was yet a boy found he could not bear to see her go. So he tossed his fishing kit into his front garden, bade farewell to the girl next door and escorted the fairy princess to her home a mile away.

Oh, the divine glory of that first brief stroll together. They moved dreamily along, side by side, without saying a single word. But the trees stretched green arms out to bless them and the birds sang fit to burst and it seemed as if there were fifty suns in the sky.

Out one corner of his eye he could see the fairy princess gliding close by him, for he dared not look straight into her lovely face. He could hear the light clip-clip of her shoes keeping time with the heavier crunch of his own. He could see the swing of her slender thighs and legs, the tremble of a wind-stirred curl at the nape of her neck. And he could smell her, a soft, warm, feminine smell faintly scented with powder.

Deep within himself he wanted to go on and on and on with her, toward horizon after horizon, for ever and ever and ever. Neither eating nor drinking nor sleeping, but just going on, with her, side by side. It was not to be. Eventually they arrived at her garden gate, faced each other shyly, did not know what to say.

Then after an embarrassing silence he trembled inside as he asked if he might see her again. It was like pleading for life knowing that the answer might be death. But again came her sweet blush as she said yes, he could. His heart leaped so hard he almost went up with it.

When, he inquired, oh please, say when. Through the fairy princess's mind went the thought that she ought to say next Saturday so as not to appear too eager, but that

meant a week away and a week is an awfully long time. So she got out of it by asking when would suit him best.

His forehead was moist and his brain all strange and dreamy as he heard a voice vaguely like his own say, "This evening."

The fairy princess was so surprised that her face went pink for the third time. It was then she discovered that she had handled her spell a little carelessly and spilled some of it upon herself for she was quite unable to refuse. So she agreed and floated into her home and smiled at him through the closing door.

How he returned to his own home he did not know and cannot remember. One thing was certain: he did not walk on ordinary human feet. Perhaps he soared on invisible wings or something like that. Once or twice he had a wild desire to dance and wave his arms and shout his gladness into the sky.

"I am to meet the fairy princess! Nobody else has ever taken her out. But I am going to take her out. The fairy princess is mine, mine, mine!"

No particular time had been mentioned by either of them. Their understanding was that he would call for her just as soon as he was ready. He could not get ready quickly enough. He fidgeted around the house yipping with impatience because tea would be another half hour. His mother wondered what on earth had come over him. And when the meal was on the table he bolted it with furious haste. He polished his shoes as never before, scrubbed face, neck, hands and wrists, put on clean shirt and collar without being told, slicked his hair, rushed out while others gazed after him in amazement.

In the road he strove to walk with airy nonchalance but somehow or other his legs kept speeding up until he was almost running. Then he would force them to slow down a couple of hundred yards after which they'd again build up toward a sprint.

Halfway to the house of the fairy princess it occurred to him that she might not be ready or expecting him seeing that he had moved so fast. She needed a little more time than he had given her. Yet he could not reduce pace for keeps; it was physically impossible. He solved that problem by walking rapidly six times round the same block. No power on earth could make him do it the seventh time because six was as much as he could stand.

He made straight for her home whether she were ready or not. An electric thrill ran down his spine as he opened her garden gate for the first itme ever. He walked along the path, watching her door come nearer and nearer while awful feelings took hold of him. His fingers were damp and shaky as they reached for the knocker.

Then he knocked and heard her

light footsteps coming to the door and his heart went wildly bump-bump-bump and the pulse pounded in his veins and his brain went all swirly and confused and his stomach felt sick with excitement.

The next moment she opened the door and looked at him, with shiny eyes she put the spell on him anew. He couldn't speak. He couldn't think what to say or do, where to put hands suddenly grown large or dispose of feet that had become enormous. All he could manage was a faint grin that he was sure made him look hopelessly inadequate and silly. He had never felt more feeble in his life.

The fairy princess noticed none of this or if she did she was too good and kind to show it. She invited him inside, introduced him to her mother. That action gave him much needed strength. The introduction was like official recognition of his special part in this household's scheme of things. It was a little ceremony that appointed him guardian and protector.

He chatted awhile with the mother who as far as he could tell was not displeased with him. Soon the fairy princess appeared dressed in readiness to go out. Her face was flushed, her glorious eyes excited and the warm, scented smell of her pervaded the room. She could not have looked more beautiful. She was the most wonderful creature that God in His goodness had ever placed on earth.

They went out together. Again she was walking by his side, not this time for a mere mile but for an entire evening. How proud of her he felt, how immensely proud. He was so drunk with her that his mind pulled two ways at once. He wanted to walk her through the town, along the streets where people he knew would see them and point and exclaim. He wanted to tell the whole world what the fairy princess had consented to become.

My girl. *My* girl!

Yet he also wanted to take her into the peaceful country where everything was good and lovely and somewhere on a grassy bank they could sit alone while he worshipped her. He yearned to have her wholly and entirely to himself yet somehow let everybody see her. He could not do both things at the same time.

While still in these throes of chronic indecision he found they were strolling down a shady lane and realized that they had gone quite a way without speaking to each other. He sought for conversation and got it going. They chatted breathlessly and volubly, with many little laughs.

It turned out that her sixteenth birthday had been a fortnight before. She was six weeks younger than he. This arrangement could not have been more perfect he then believed. At that time it wasn't possible for him to see that this would lead to tragedy.

On he wandered with the fairy

princess in the eventide of a fairy world. And as the sun went down and crimson streamers spread across the purpling sky their fingers accidentally touched. A thrill of ecstasy went through him. He opened his hand, feeling for hers, and gently, shyly her small warm hand slid into his.

When they returned soon after dusk she was holding his arm with delightful possessiveness. Every now and again he pressed the arm to his side and made her eyes light up.

At the garden gate he held her, feeling her soft and yielding against him, scenting the fragrance of her hair. He whispered of her wonder and her sweetness, of how he could no longer live without her, of how he would love her deeply and truly no matter what might happen . . . until the day . . . he died.

* * *

THERE now, Mummy's dropped her sewing and lost her needle. I shouldn't sit here telling stories while she wants to concentrate on her work. A person can't give full attention to two things at once. Now she has to hunt around the carpet all because of me.

"All right, dear, don't wriggle so impatiently on my lap. I'll get along with the story. Where was I? At the garden gate?

Yes, he told the fairy princess of his everlasting love. And when the time arrived for her to go indoors he gazed longingly at her lips and wondered whether he dare kiss her goodnight. For he was mortally afraid of offending or displeasing her. Perhaps she knew what was passing through his mind because she turned her head away from him but did not try to escape his arms. That made him think maybe she would not mind.

He put a gentle finger under her chin and lifted her face. Her lips came up full and red, warm and moist. He kissed her, hugging her close and wanting to murmur endearments even as he kissed. Then when his lips had parted from hers he looked deeply into her eyes, saw something mystical and marvelous.

It seemed somehow that he was looking into her, right down inside her until he could see her very heart. And while he looked a little door in her heart swung open and a great golden radiance poured forth and bathed him with its wondrous light.

After that he could not recall saying goodnight or making another date or finding his own way home. Somehow he was in bed, knowing that he was to see her on the morrow. He could not sleep because of flashes of golden light within his brain and strange thrills running through his body. He could not tell whether he was sane or crazy but knew with absolute certainty that he no longer cared.

It was all too supremely wonderful for care.

FOR two and a half long, blissful years the Man who was still a boy shared every spare moment of his life with the fairy princess. They were so inseparable and so manifestly happy that the entire neighborhood had noted it, remarked upon it and eventually dismissed it as something too permanent for comment.

Many, many times did he tell the fairy princess of his everlasting love. Many times he clasped her to him and kissed her, then watched the door open in her heart and the great golden radiance come forth to bathe him in magic beauty.

Alas! when they were eighteen and a half a tiny, almost invisible rift came between them and widened inch by inch, forcing them apart. At first neither realized what was happening and when they did they could not understand it. Desperately they held hands across the growing chasm, then stretched arms at full length to touch fingertips.

But the gap inexorably grew and grew until even that contact was broken and they were apart. They had managed to remain together, even though precariously, until they were nineteen, seeing each other less and less, feeling their splendid love fading slowly but surely and not knowing why.

Their kisses had changed from the full, fierce glow of youthful passion to dutiful pecks. The little door opened more and more reluctantly until finally it stayed closed and no radiance came forth. With pathetic helplessness they sought time and again to recapture the former glory because they still retained a genuine affection based on the love that once had been. They failed. The magic had gone as though dissolved by a potent curse. They parted after three wonderful years, at nineteen.

For the last time they stood together at the garden gate, silent and sad, knowing that this was goodbye. For the last time they embraced and kissed, not as lovers any more but as friends who must go away for reasons beyond understanding. Their lips met and the door in the fairy princess's heart remained locked, bolted and barred. She could not force it open no matter how hard she tried.

The Man who was still a boy went home on leaden feet through a dark and solemn world hushed with the pain of the parting. The fairy princess was his no more. Never, never, never. It was as if the sun had gone out and the stars become hidden and part of himself had been taken away. Again he could not sleep. He tossed and turned restlessly all night, not for the thrill of his gain but from the sorrow of his loss.

What had happened? Well, darling, I doubt whether you're old enough to grasp the cause. They weren't although they were older than you. To see things properly you sometimes have to get what they call a true perspective and

that can mean growing older still. You want me to tell you just the same? Oh Lord, how men are afflicted by feminine curiosity! All right, you asked for it.

You see, dear, there's a hellish law of Nature that has separated many a man from his fairy princess. Men grow so much bigger and stronger than women that it takes them a bit longer to reach full adulthood. Result is that girls mature quickly and boys catch up later.

So at the critical age of nineteen the Man was still a boy but the fairy princess was already a young woman, physically ready for marriage and perhaps even for motherhood. Temporarily he had become too young for her. It was his comparative immaturity that made their love go dormant. She needed someone at the same or greater stage of growth and that meant someone now older than the Man. Had kindly fate thrown them together again three or maybe two years later they'd have found themselves level once more. Their love might have sprung back to new life, larger, more intense, more serious and infinitely more beautiful.

No, my little sweet, it didn't happen that way. By the time the Man had become truly a man he'd lost touch with the fairy princess. Pride and self-consciousness helped to keep them apart, plus the belief that whatever was wrong was permanent, which it wasn't. Now and again an ache in his soul made him look for her but those times he failed to find her. He sought other girls.

He went out with many girls. Each and every one was in some way like the fairy princess. Some bore fair resemblance to her but lacked her spirit or personality. Others shared her character in part but not her features. A few had no more than one or two of her peculiar mannerisms. He kept close company for six months with a girl who had only her eyes. Not one had a little door in her heart to open and pour forth a blinding radiance.

At twenty-four when the Man was tall and strong and heavily built he heard from a friend that the fairy princess was about to be married to another. The goodbye at the garden gate had been the end of their association. This news was the end of his last and most wistful hopes. There was nothing more for him in a world become eternally dark.

He went to the spaceport and signed on for a long trip. That was easy enough because he had first-class qualifications and it's extremely hard to find men willing to do a long trip. Why? Because they're gone for so many years.

Just think! A man departs for twenty-five years, two and a half times as long as you've lived. When he comes back it's rather awful. The parents and old folk he knew are no more than stones

in a graveyard. The friends of his youth are scattered, settled and middle-aged. The young folk weren't even born when he left.

A long-tripper returns to consuming sadness. That's why many a one comes home to rest and then within a year signs on for another that will take him near to the end of his days.

Many, many years ago, far before your Mummy and I came into this world, scientists thought that the most distant stars could be reached only with the aid of bigger and better and faster rockets or with the help of some yet unthought-of means of locomotion. It hasn't worked out that way, not that way at all. The stars have been gained chiefly because there are men who want to escape and forget, the kind of men who in olden days went to Sidi bel Abbes and joined the Foreign Legion. When there are no more such men the stars will be lost despite the most wonderful rockets in creation. Isn't it strange to think that many a planet has felt a human foot solely because back here a little door has been locked and barred?

* * *

THE man signed on and the ship blasted for the stars the very day of the fairy princess's wedding. Even as Earth and Moon fled far behind the Man gazed at them longingly and hoped she would be very happy. When you grow up, dear, remember always that true love puts the loved one's happiness before one's own.

For twenty-five long aching years the Man roamed among the stars. Most of that time he forgot the fairy princess because he had too many other things on his mind. He was in the great Andromedan War when two worlds flamed into sudden suns and millions died. He was in the Bootes massacre and escaped with the few survivors. He was at the rescue of the *Starleader* when that mighty vessel met disaster. Oh, yes, he had plenty to occupy his thoughts.

Promotion is inevitable in so long a period of time. The Man went away a junior navigation-officer. He ended up a commodore, a big, gray-haired man with a lined face, many stars on his chest, many scars on his body.

Yet though he had lots to do there were occasional times when he could rest a little while and enjoy his silences. And then, more often than not, he would lie in his cabin and think of the fairy princess, the brightness of her eyes, the fullness of her lips, the warmth and scent of her body, the tender touch of her hand, the radiance from the door in her heart.

When he was only a boy he'd told her he would love her for ever and ever and ever. You know what they call that? They call it a lot of contemptuous names.

Childish fancy.

Puppy love.

Adolescent infatuation.

That's what it should have been.

That and no more. A condition that comes like measles, runs its course and dies away—for keeps.

Listen, dear, although you are so very young I'll tell you something about men that no woman ever knows. No matter how old a man may become, or how many lovely women he has known, or how long and happily he has been married, or how deeply he loves his wife, a man never forgets his first love. To the very end of his days she remains someone very special to him.

Remember that, won't you? I want you to remember it. Because someday you will be somebody's fairy princess — and then drift away. Please be kind to him. He will tell you in whispers and in writing that he will love you always. Years later you will be tempted to laugh at the memory.

Yet it will be true.

Even though you quarrel, part as enemies, openly hate and despise each other in order to salve your pride, the break will hurt him, the pain secretly remain within him. The sweet things he told you will stay true, for all time.

WHAT, you don't like the story because it is sad and has no proper ending? There's a little bit more to it but it's terribly late and your Mummy must be bored. Don't you think it's time for bed?

Oh, well, just a few minutes more while I tell the rest. The Man came home when his twenty-five years were up. He came back knowing he'd find a world he did not want and that after a few months or a year at most he would sign on for another long trip that would be his last.

Of course, he went around looking up what old friends he could find in exactly the same way as I've come to see your Mummy. There weren't many. Some were dead, some moved without trace and he had to be content with the few who remained.

One day he was walking to the spaceport and feeling tempted to sign again without delay. There he encountered a missing friend who now lived in a far town. At first they scarcely recognized each other, but when they did they were delighted and had a long talk.

Toward the end of the conversation the friend made casual mention of the fairy princess. Her home was right near him, he said, she was now a widow, having lost her husband four years ago. She and her young daughter were all alone.

Immediately he heard this the Man felt something swell tremendously inside him. Ending the talk, he hurried out, hired a fast car, drove like a madman to the fairy princess's home. All the way there he felt a series of thrills precisely like those when he had first called for her in clean shirt and polished shoes.

He walked up to her door and

knocked. Again his heart went bump-bump-bump and the pulse pounded in his veins and his brain went all swirly and confused and his stomach was sick with excitement.

And exactly as it was so long ago, she answered and smiled at him. She was plump and grave, middle-aged and gray-haired. But her eyes put an immediate spell upon him so that for a moment he was unable to speak, neither could he see her as she really was. He could see only the fairy princess so long remembered.

He stood there feeling futile and inadequate. He wanted to tell her that she was not alone so long as he survived because he loved her still and had never ceased to love. Somehow he could not get the words out right away.

She invited him in, pleased to see him. He glanced over her modest home, met her little daughter, registered these things no more than dimly because he had eyes only for her, the wonderful girl he had kissed by the garden gate.

So the Man and the fairy princess had met again for a few sweet moments before the last and final parting. That's the end of the story, dear, and now you must go to bed.

Eh?

For heaven's sake stop jerking around like a jack-in-the-box. There's nothing the matter with your Mummy, nothing at all. She is merely bending low over her sewing.

Don't get so agitated, honey. I'll let you go to her if you insist. She's all right. Let me look again. No, she's not crying—even though the tender tears are falling one by one.

Hush, my baby, I'll tell you what we'll do. You take my hand and hold it very tightly. Then we'll tiptoe across the carpet and touch her fragrant hair to show how much we love her.

She isn't weeping really, not really.

This is the happy ending.

The fairy princess is opening the door in her heart.

Dear God, can't you see the golden glory?

THE END

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A THOUSAND ANGELS CAN DANCE...

By H. B. Carl

Illustrated by Michael Becker

THE meteor hadn't done much damage; it had only knocked out the gyro. And now the ship was spinning; slowly, to be sure, but it was spinning. The rotation had to be halted with the manual controls while at the outer limits of the atmosphere. Only the landing rockets were left fully fueled, and they had to be steadied, straight down.

"One of us goes in there," said Joe Mason flatly, indicating the hatch of the manual control cubby. "Which one?"

Lisa Crain's face paled. "It means . . ."

"Yes," said Harold Dayne. "But what difference does it make? We were going to die anyway."

Mason looked at him. "There's a planet down there—a crazy one, I'll admit, if our instruments read it right—but it's a planet, and maybe we won't die . . . if we can land on it."

Dayne shrugged. "*If* the planet has a breathable atmosphere, *if* it has food, *if* it has water, *if* it hasn't got inimical life, *if* it has a solid surface—and a hundred other ifs."

"It's going to be a *fact* that kills me, not an *if*," said Mason.

There was a strained look on Dayne's face. His voice showed the harsh tension of the situation. "There's no *if* about that manual room! The man who goes in won't die, but he won't be a whole man again."

"Unless it's a woman who goes in!" Lisa's lips were tight as she said it.

Both men whirled on her and glared.

"You're out of this," said Dayne.

Mason said nothing, but licked his lips.

"Why?" she flared. "I came along on this trip as an equal . . ."

Mason laughed sardonically. "You never were an equal. In or-

dinary things, yes; but not when it comes to being female."

"Female? What has that got to do with it?"

"A lot—now! A few minutes ago we were certain to be dying . . . now there's a chance for life. Life a moment he was speechless. Then he realized that Mason was staring too, at both of them, a growing frown on his face.

"Joe's put it a bit bluntly, Lisa," said Dayne, his voice low and gentle. "But he's right. We've got a

on a new planet, the *only* life possible to any of us, *and to our children.* If one of us men goes in there, you can still have children. But if you go in . . ."

Dayne looked at Mason queerly a moment, then his face resumed a mask-like calmness and he turned to Lisa, who was staring at him with her eyes wide. The meeting of their gaze startled him, and for hundred-to-one chance to live now, and little as it is, we've got to consider facts. One of us goes in there —you don't."

"Do you *have* to open the window?"

Mason laughed harshly. "You *know* we do. We can't guide the ship manually without visual contact. And the minute that window is opened, the manual control

cubby will be flooded with cosmic rays. The occupant will be sterilized in twenty minutes!"

"Twenty minutes? That's a long time! Certainly we can land the ship in a lot less."

"Lisa, you're clutching at straws," said Dayne gently. "You know it'll take that long just to get the ship out of the spin so we can use the landing rockets. And then it'll take another half-hour to land the ship."

"And if it takes *longer*," said Mason deliberately, "the man in that cubby will die, within months, if not weeks. There's a delicate dividing line there."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lisa faintly. "How will you decide . . .?"

There was silence for a moment, then Mason looked at Lisa with a strange contemplation in his eyes. "Funny, isn't it? Here we are, two men and a woman, in the old triangle! *You* control the situation—why don't you make the decision for us?"

"Joe!" Lisa's voice was shocked.

Mason went on: "The right of the female to pick her man. The civilized way! Better than the original way of battling it out—to the survivor the spoils! Only we can't battle it out! It takes two of us to land the ship!"

"Cut it, Joe!" said Dayne sharply. "This is no Adam and Eve proposition, yet. We're faced with the necessity of landing on this planet. Once we've landed, there's the chance we can refuel and get back to Earth. If there's any Element X in the atmosphere."

Mason laughed shortly, relaxed. "Okay. But back on Earth we had another problem — we needed money, lots of it, to get the things we wanted. We decided fame would bring it to us. We decided to be the first human beings to reach another planetary system. We picked Wolf 357. We were the first to use the dimension drive that detours distance—otherwise it would have taken eleven years to reach the system; but we did it in three weeks! Sure, we'd have that original problem licked already, even if we never landed anywhere — if we could get back. We've proved the dimension drive to be workable. Now, with what we've learned, Earthmen could travel across the galaxy. But first we've got to save our lives, then find out how to get back to Earth . . ."

"Let's leave it right there," said Dayne. "Any further suppositions can be left until the time they become pertinent. Right now, let's decide who goes into that room—and leave Lisa out of it."

Mason fished in his pocket. "Toss a coin?"

"Why not?"

"What'd'ya want?"

"Tails."

Mason spun the coin in the air, snatched it into his fist, slapped it across his other hand. "You've got it," he said emotionlessly.

Lisa's face whitened, then she

turned wordlessly to the instrument panel, her voice constricted. "I'll handle the phones. Joe, you take the landing rockets."

Mason looked at Dayne, then at the manual control chamber. He hesitated. "Wait until the last minute," he said. "Maybe we can make it in under twenty minutes."

Dayne looked at Lisa's shoulders, suddenly stiff as she sat putting on the earphones that would connect her with the manual chamber with which she could relay his signals to Mason at the rockets.

"Yeah . . ." he said vaguely.

LISA spoke into the phones. "Have you got the window open yet, Harold?"

His tinny transmitter voice came to her ears. "Yes. Just now opened it."

"What do you see?"

"Nothing . . . but stars. The ship must be turned away from the planet . . . Uh . . . now I see . . . it's a *small* planet!"

"How small?"

There was no answer. Lisa relayed the information concerning the smallness to Mason. He frowned.

"Maybe there's no atmosphere," said Lisa slowly.

"Yes there is! The instruments show we're coming into it already! And the planet indicates *big*—as big as Earth. Tell him to straighten out the spin *now*."

"Straighten out the spin, Harold! We're entering the atmosphere."

"I am straightening it out," came Dayne's voice, peculiarly strained. As evidence of his words, the two in the windowless main control room felt the momentary vertigo of a change in the ship's circular motion. Again it came, and several more times in quick succession. Then it stopped. "Lost the planet," came Dayne's baffled voice.

The wait seemed endless to Lisa, and she gripped the phones tightly to her ears. Dayne's voice came in a whisper. "Lisa, if we don't come out of this alive, I want you to know that I love you.

Lisa didn't dare speak, but she sensed something terribly wrong in Dayne's voice. It went on: "I can see it again. I'll try to straighten out the ship as best I can—it's a mighty small target . . . But even if we land on this . . . planet, it'll be . . ." His voice trailed off.

Once more the instants of vertigo came, this time in innumerable starts and stops. "I've got her," said Dayne. "Couple more shots with the stabilizer jets and she'll be on axis-zero. . . ." Suddenly his voice became loud in her ears. "Give it to her! Land her! You've got about a thousand miles! I'll keep her on zero . . ."

Lisa snatched the phones from her ears and relayed the information to Mason in a high-pitched voice. Mason glanced at his instruments.

"Eight hundred," he said drily. But his hands did not move on the

firing levers.

"Joe, we're *falling!*" said Lisa sharply.

"Seven-fifty," said Mason. "Every hundred miles is two minutes . . ."

Lisa's eyes widened in realization. She glanced at the clock. Dayne had already been in the manual chamber seventeen minutes. Mason was trying to give him every break in time. If they could get down to the dense atmosphere in time . . . suddenly she sobbed as she realized it was impossible. Even in free fall they'd reach dense atmosphere ten minutes too late. She buried her head in her hands and waited.

Little starts of vertigo attested to the labors of Harold Dayne in the exposed cubby.

Mason's voice droned on: "Five-fifty . . . five . . . four-fifty . . . four . . ."

Suddenly the ship shuddered and a dull roar sounded through the hull, communicating itself from the rockets through the metal. There was as yet insufficient air outside to transmit sound. But Mason had waited until an almost suicidally late moment to halt the ship's downward plunge. Lisa tensed, listening to the growing roar. Had he waited *too* long?

She lifted her eyes to the altimeter. "Two hundred miles . . ." she whispered.

Swiftly the needle plunged down, and steadily the roar grew. Now she felt pressed down in her seat, her weight becoming momentarily more insupportable. She put her head down again, resting her forehead on the rubber headrest. Then she fought against the blackness that sought to overwhelm her.

She failed.

"HOW long were you in the chamber?" asked Lisa, trying to make her voice calm, casual.

"Twenty-nine minutes," said Joe shortly.

Dayne ignored her. "Let's go out and see this planet. I'm curious to see how small it really is. I must have been having delusions — if these instruments are right. Mass similar to Earth — atmosphere fourteen point three pounds . . ."

"How's the air content?" asked Lisa.

Mason grinned at her. "Does it matter? If it's no good, we might as well find out now. I'd rather die quick outside than slow inside."

She shrugged. "Okay, let's go." She turned to the outer lock.

In a few moments they had it unfastened, and it swung slowly inward. Outside blue sky became visible, cloudless and intensely clear. The air remained breathable, pure.

"Can't see the ground yet," said Mason in puzzled tones. "We must be on an angle . . ."

"I don't think so," said Dayne shortly. He walked through the

lock, stood at its outer edge and looked down. His face went blank, his voice was only a whisper.

"What is it?" asked Lisa, stepping over the edge of the lock and joining him. She looked down, gasped. Mason came out too, and looked. "Where is it?" he asked blankly.

Harold Dayne pointed straight down. "There," he whispered. "Between our landing fins . . ."

"Great God!" croaked Mason. "It's . . . it's only *thirty feet* in diameter! Only a hunk of rock!"

"I told you it was small . . ." said Dayne as though in a trance. "I . . . I didn't think it was *that* small. It must weigh . . ."

"Billions of tons to the cubic inch!" gasped Lisa.

Suddenly Mason began to laugh, a loud, hysterical laugh that contorted his face strangely. He turned, stumbled back into the ship, flung himself into his seat, and laughed until he sobbed, then suddenly he seemed to become aware that the two were standing beside him, looking down at him. Lisa was trying to soothe him. He took his hand in hers. "Joe! Joe, please don't! It was a hundred-to-one chance anyway . . . It's nothing we couldn't have expected!"

Mason sobered, and he clutched her hand tightly in his until she tried to withdraw it. As she did so, his face darkened. "Yeah. No more than we could have expected. Now we're going to die anyway. As soon as our food's gone. A couple month more, at most. And funny thing, we're all even again."

Lisa succeeded in drawing her hand away at last. "What do you mean, all even?" she asked.

Mason lumbered to his feet. "Right down to basics again, that's what I mean! Life, and everything it offers, all packed into a period of weeks, and then it's all over. No Adam and Eve on a new planet. Not even a couple of ants on a sand pile! Two men and a woman, and it doesn't make a bit of difference if one of them's sterile . . ."

"Mason!" said Dayne sharply.

"Don't Mason me," said the other thickly. "When you lost the toss, you were counted out. It's still that way, see?"

"We're both out!" said Dayne. "You're talking nonsense, Mason. We're going to die, but we're going to die decent. Besides, you're right —it *is* even again. It's back in Lisa's hands. If she wants either one of us . . ."

Mason glared at him. "So *that's* your idea of how it'll be played, hey? Smart, aren't you. She's in love with you. Easy to say which way she'll go *now*. But not with me, Dayne. You lost the toss, and you're going to stay with the toss."

"We weren't tossing for Lisa," said Dayne, a dangerous note creeping into his voice. "We were tossing to see who went into that cubby, and that's all. That phase of it is ended . . ."

"No it isn't," said Mason, his body stiffening imperceptibly.

"You know why?"

"No, I don't."

"Because I'm going to kill you!"

Mason hurled his body toward Dayne and Dayne reeled and went down under a haymaker punch. But he had sensed the attack and managed to duck slightly. He rolled frantically aside, but Mason's thick body plunged down on him, and in an instant, they were battling desperately on the floor of the control chamber. Lisa drew back, horrified, against the control panel, then, as the savage battle went on, cast frantically about for a weapon. There was nothing loose in sight. There is nothing left loose in a spaceship.

Dayne felt Mason's fingers on his windpipe, clutching with a mad strength. His vision reeled. But he kicked out wildly, and Mason howled, and cursed, flinging himself aside to roll in momentary agony. But before Dayne could still his whirling senses enough fully to regain his feet, the big body plunged down on him once more. Again the fingers found their mark, and suddenly Dayne was conscious of an added weight upon him. Lisa had flung herself upon Mason's back, screaming and clawing.

Mason snarled in rage, heaved his shoulders back, and Lisa crashed against the control panel. Once again she blacked out.

SHE lay on the ground, her head on Dayne's knee, and he was bathing her forehead with a wet handkerchief. In the sky the sun shone brightly, and as she turned her head wonderingly, she saw the looming bulk of the spaceship some hundred feet away, resting in a thicket of thick green vegetation. Beyond it rose a range of mountains, whitecapped with snow at their peaks. In the immediate vicinity she heard the bubbling of a brook, and turned her head around to regard it in amazement. A bird rose from its edge and flew overhead, whistling, bringing her gaze back to Dayne's smiling face, looking down at her.

"What . . . is it Heaven?" she gasped.

He laughed aloud. "Heavens no! This is a planet of the Wolf 357 System. We've landed safely, and in a few days we'll be taking off for home. I've got the fuel compressors working full speed, and they will have the tanks full of Element X before you know it. This atmosphere is rich in it."

"But how did we get here?" She struggled up to a sitting position and looked around. "How did you get the ship off that horrid bit of rock and find this planet?"

He grinned. "I didn't."

"Then what . . . ?"

He waved his hand. "*This* is the horrid bit of rock!"

"This . . . ?" She was completely baffled. "But Harold . . . How can . . . ?"

"Simple," he said. "We have just learned exactly *how* the dimension

drive works. It's all a matter of size. The bigger you are, the faster you go. So when we got to the planet, we were hundreds of times larger than it was, and we landed on it in that condition. But then the law of something or other operated, and we shrank down, became more dense, until . . . well, here we are. And everything's okay . . ."

Suddenly Lisa started up and stared wildly at the spaceship. "Joe!" she exclaimed. "He tried to kill you!"

He sobered. "Let's not think of that," he said. "You saved my life when you piled on. He knocked you out, but it gave me my chance. I . . ."

She looked at him. "You . . . what?" she asked faintly.

"I won," he said. "And I love you."

For one long instant she stared at him, then she threw herself into his arms, sobbing softly. He held her gently. When she quieted, she looked up at him.

"Down to basics," she said. "I love you too."

"You'll marry me . . . anyway?" he asked. "When we get back to Earth?"

"Of course."

"But we can't have any kids . . ."

She smiled up at him. "We aren't Adam and Eve, even if this is a new planet," she said. "We're going back to Earth, and when we get there, we can adopt some."

He kissed her. "Sure we can! And then we can bring them back here, and they can be their own Adams and Eves—along with a bunch of other human beings. This planet isn't as little as I *thought*. Those thousand angels who danced on the head of a pin have nothing on us. There'll be millions of little angels here before we're through."

There was a sparkle in her eyes. "And they'll all be ours!"

"In a way," he said. "In a way."

THE END

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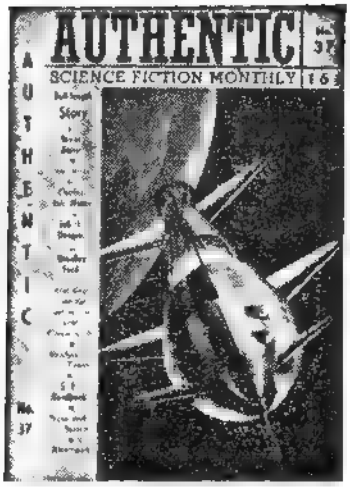

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LET ME LIVE IN A HOUSE

The little man who wasn't there — he *couldn't* be there, just as there couldn't be a storm in the weather-controlled dome on Ganymede — but the little man stood in the pouring rain and knocked at the door, to Collier's horror.

By Chad Oliver

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

IT was all exactly perfect, down to the last scratch on the white picket fence and the frigidaire that wheezed asthmatically at predictable intervals throughout the night.

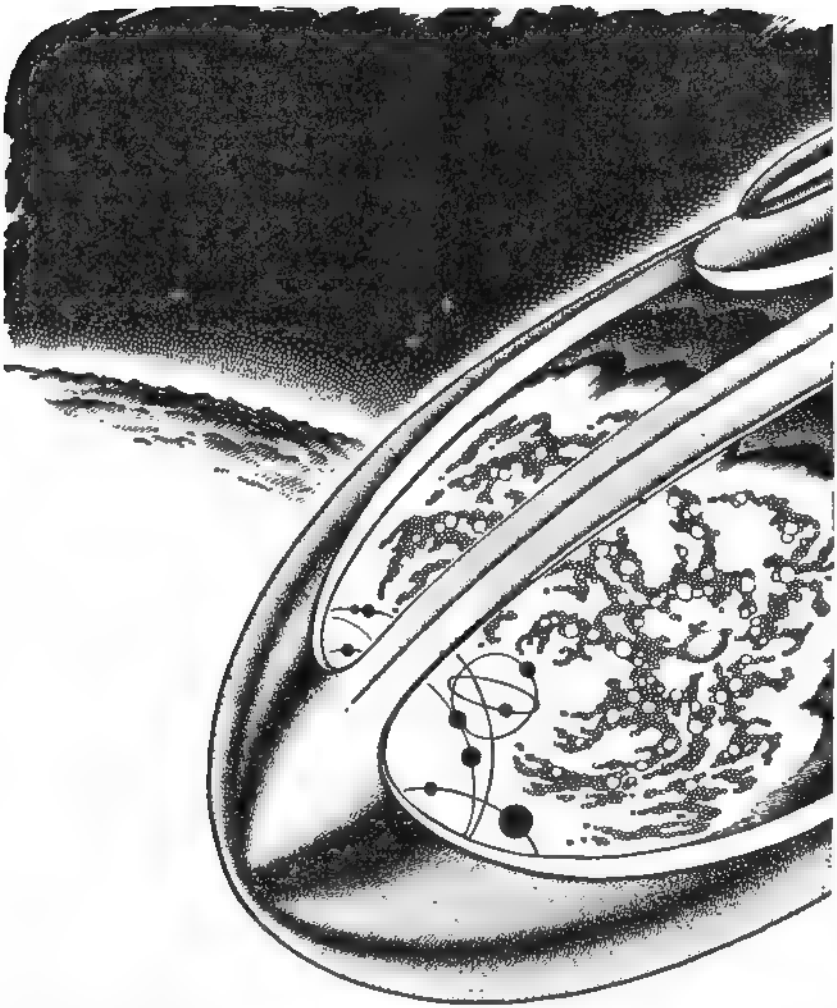
The two white cottages rested lightly on their fresh green lawns, like contented dreams. They were smug in their completeness. They had green shutters and substantial brass door knockers. They had clean, crisp curtains on the windows, and knickknacks on the mantelpieces over the fireplaces. They had a fragment of poetry, caught in dime-store frames in the halls: *Let me live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man.*

One of the cottages had a picture of crusty old Grandfather Walters, and that was important.

Soft and subtle sounds hummed through the warm air. One of the sounds was that of a copter, high overhead, but you couldn't see it, of course. A breeze sighed across the grass, but the grass was motionless. Somewhere, children laughed and shouted as they clambered and splashed in the old swimming hole.

There were no children, naturally—nor any swimming hole, for that matter.

It was all exactly perfect,

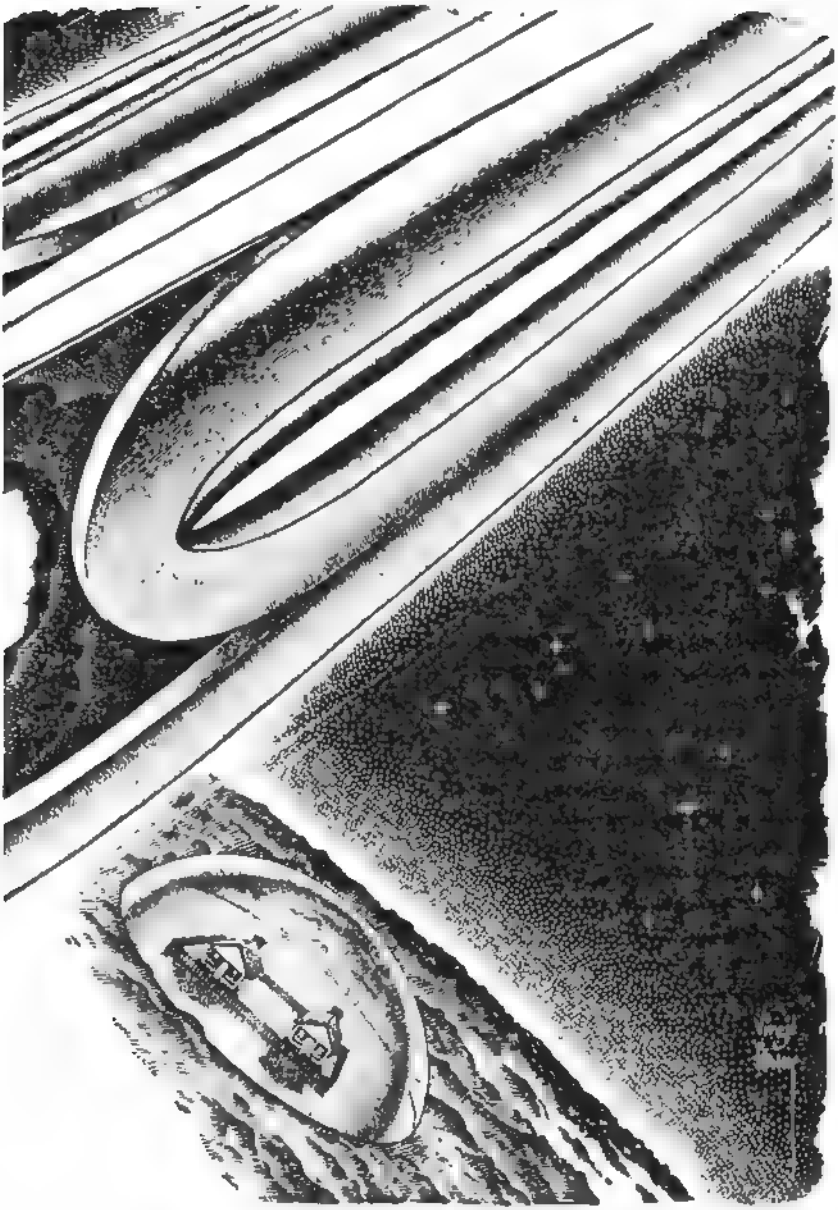


though. *Exactly*. If you didn't know better, you'd swear it was real.

Gordon Collier breathed in the smell of flowers that didn't exist and stared without enthusiasm at the white clouds that drifted along through a robin's-egg-blue sky.

"Damn it all," he said.

He kicked at the green grass under his feet and failed to dent it. Then he walked into his snug white cottage and slammed the



door behind him, hard.

Helen called from the kitchen: "Don't slam the door, dear."

"I'm sorry," Gordon said. "It slipped."

Helen came bustling in. She was an attractive, if hardly spectacular, woman of thirty. She had brown hair and eyes and a domestic manner. She kissed her husband lightly. "Been over at the Walters'?" she asked.

"How did you guess?" Gordon said. Where did she *think* he had been—outside?

"Now, Gordey," Helen admonished him. "You needn't snap my head off for asking a civil question."

"Please don't call me 'Gordey,'" Gordon said irritably. Then he relented—it wasn't her fault, after all. He gave her the news about the Walters. "Bart's playing football," he related for the millionth time, "and Mary is watching tri-di."

"Will they be dropping over for cards tonight?" Helen asked.

She's playing the game to the hilt, Gordon thought. *She's learned her part like a machine. I wish I could do that.*

"They'll be over," he said.

Helen's eyes lighted up happily. She had always loved company, Gordon remembered. "My!" she exclaimed. "I'd better see about supper." She smiled eagerly, like a dog at a rabbit, and hustled away back to the kitchen.

Gordon Collier watched his wife go, not without admiration of a sort. They had certainly picked well when they picked Bart, who could sit for hours with his electric football game, reliving the past, or who could with equal absorption paint charmingly naive pictures about the stars. Mary, too, was fine—as long as she had her tri-di set, her life was complete. But when they had picked his wife, they had hit the nail on the head. She was perfect in her part—she gave the impression of actually *believing* in it.

Gordon frowned sourly at himself. "The trouble with you, Gordon," he said softly, "is that you just haven't learned your lines very well."

There was a reason for that, too—but he preferred not to think about it.

After supper—steak and fried potatoes and salad and coffee—the doorbell rang. It was, of course, the Walters.

"Well!" exclaimed Helen. "If it isn't Bart and Mary!"

In they came — Mary, gray at forty, looking to see if the tri-di was on, and Barton, big and wholesome as a vitamin ad, bounding through the door as though it were the enemy goal line.

Four people, Gordon thought. *Four people, utterly alone. Four human beings, pretending to be a society.*

Four people.

They exchanged such small talk as there was. Since they had all been doing precisely the same

things for seven months, there wasn't much in the way of startling information to be passed back and forth. The bulk of the conversation was taken up with Mary's opinion of the latest tri-di shows, and it developed that she liked them all.

She turned on Gordon's set, which didn't please him unduly, and for half an hour they watched a variety show—canned and built into the set, of course—that was mainly distinguished by its singular lack of variety of any sort. Finally, in desperation, Gordon got out the cards.

"We'll make it poker tonight," he decided as they all sat down at the collapsible green card table. He dealt out four hands of three-card draw, shoved a quarter into the center of the table, and settled back to enjoy the game as best he could.

It wasn't easy. Mary turned up the tri-di in order to hear better, and Barton engaged with furious energy in his favorite pastime—replaying the 1973 Stanford-Notre Dame game, with himself in the starring role.

At eleven o'clock sharp Helen served the cheese and crackers.

At midnight, they heard the new sound.

It was a faint whistle, and it hissed over their heads like an ice-coated snake. It sizzled in from far away, and then there was a long, still pause. Finally, there was a shadowy suggestion of a thump.

Gordon instantly cut off the tri-di set. They all listened. He opened a window and looked out. He couldn't see anything — the blue sky had switched to the deep purple of night and the only glimmer of light came from the porch lamp on the cottage next door. There was nothing to see, and all that he heard were the normal sounds that weren't really there—the chirp of crickets, the soft sigh of the breeze.

"Did you hear it?" he asked the others.

They nodded, uncertain and suddenly alone. *A new sound.* How could that be?

Gordon Collier walked nervously out of the room, followed by Barton. He clenched his fists, feeling the clammy sweat in the palms of his hands, and fought to keep the fear from surging up within him. They walked into a small hall and Gordon pressed a button. A section of the wall slid smoothly back on oiled runners, and the two men walked into the white, brightly-lighted equipment room.

Gordon kept his hand steady and flipped on the outside scanners. He couldn't see a thing. He tried the tracer screen, and it was blank. Barton tried the radio, on the off chance that someone was trying to contact them. There was silence.

They checked the radar charts for the past hour. They were all quite normal—except the last one. That one had a streak on it, a very sharp and clear and unmistakable streak. It was in the shape of an

arc, and it curved down in a grimly familiar way. It started far out in space and it ended. Outside—Outside in the ice and the rocks and the cold.

"Probably a meteor," Barton suggested.

"Probably," Gordon agreed dubiously, and made a note to that effect in the permanent record.

"Well, what else *could* it have been?" Barton challenged.

"Nothing," Gordon admitted. "It was a meteor."

They swung the wall shut again, covering the tubes and screens and coils with flowered wallpaper and Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*. They returned to the living room, where their wives still sat around the card table waiting for them. The room was as comfortable as ever, and the tri-di set was on again.

It was all just as they had left it, Gordon thought—but it was different. The room seemed smaller, constricted, isolated. The temperature had not changed, but it was colder. Millions and millions of miles flowed into the room and crawled around the walls. . . .

"Just a meteor, I guess," Gordon said.

They went on with their game for another hour, and then Barton and Mary went home to bed. Before they left, they invited Gordon and Helen to visit them the next night.

The house was suddenly empty.

Gordon Collier held his wife in his arms and listened to the frigidaire wheezing in the kitchen and the water dripping from a half-closed faucet. Outside, there were only the crickets and the wind.

"It was only a meteor," he said.

"I know," said his wife.

They went to bed then, but sleep was slow in coming. They had a home, of course, a little white cottage in a green yard. They had two nice neighbors and blue skies and a tri-di set. It was all exactly perfect, and there was certainly nothing to be afraid of.

But it was a long way back, and they had no ship.

WHEN Gordon Collier awoke in the morning, he knew instantly that something was wrong. He swung himself out of bed and stood in the middle of the room, half-crouched, not sure what he was looking for.

The room seemed normal enough. The twin beds were in their proper places, the rug was smooth, his watch was till on the dresser where he had left it. He looked at the alarm clock and saw that it hadn't gone off yet. His wife was still asleep. What had awakened him?

He stood quite still and listened. At once, he heard it. It came from outside, out by the green lawn and the blue skies. He walked to the window to make certain that his senses weren't playing tricks on him. The sound was still there—another *new* sound. Another new sound where there could *be* no new

sounds, but only the old ones, repeating themselves over and over again. . . .

He closed the window, trying to shut it out. Perhaps, he told himself, it wasn't exactly a new sound after all; perhaps it was only the old sound distorted by a faulty speaker or a bad tube. There had been gentle breezes before, summery puffs and wisps of air, and even the gentle patter of light rain once every two weeks. He listened again, straining his ears, but he did not open the window. His heart beat spasmodically in his chest. No, there could be no doubt of it!

The wind was rising.

Helen moaned in her sleep and Gordon decided not to awaken her. She might need her sleep and then some before this was over, he knew. He dressed and walked out into the hall, pressed the button that opened the equipment room, and went inside. He checked everything — dials, scanners, tracers, charts. Again, they were all quite normal except one. One of the tracers showed a faint line coming in from the ice and the rocks, in toward the two isolated cottages that huddled under the Bubble.

Presumably, it was still there—whatever it was.

The significant question was easily formulated: what did the line represent, the line that had curved down out of space and had now cut across the ice almost to his very door? What *could* it represent?

Gordon Collier forced himself to think logically, practically. It wasn't easy, not after seven months of conditioned living that had been specially designed so that he *wouldn't* think in rational terms. He closed the door, shutting off the little white house and all that it represented. He sat down on a hard metal chair with only the gleaming machines for company. He tried.

It was all too plain that he couldn't contact Earth. His radio wouldn't reach that far, and, anyhow, who was there to listen at the other end? The ship from Earth wasn't due for another five months, so he could expect no help from that source. In an emergency, the two women wouldn't be of much help. As for Bart, what he would do would depend on what *kind* of an emergency he had to face.

What kind of an emergency *was* it? He didn't know, had no way of knowing. The situation was unprecedented. It was nothing much on the face of it—a whistle and a thump and a few lines on a tracer. *And the wind,* his mind whispered, *don't forget the wind.* Nothing much, but he was afraid. He looked at his white, trembling hands and doubted himself. What could he do?

What was out there?

The wall slid open behind him and he bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"Breakfast is ready, dear," his wife said.

"Yes, yes," Gordon murmured shakily. "Yes, I'm coming."

He got to his feet and followed his wife out of the room, back into the comfortable cottage that he knew so well. He kept his eyes straight ahead of him as he walked and tried not to listen to the swelling moan of the wind that couldn't blow.

GORDON COLLIER drank his coffee black and dabbled at the poached converter eggs, trying to fake an appetite that he did not feel. His wife ate her breakfast in normal fashion, chattering familiar morning-talk in an inconsequential stream. Gordon didn't pay much attention until a stray sentence or two struck home:

"Just listen to that wind, Gordey," she said, with only a trace of strain in her voice. "I declare, I believe we're in for a storm!"

Collier forced himself to go on drinking his coffee, but he was badly shaken. *Her mind won't even accept the situation for what it is,* he thought with a chill. *She's going to play the game out to the bitter end. I'm ALONE.*

"That's right, dear," he said evenly, fighting to keep his voice steady. "We're in for a storm."

Outside, the wind whined around the corners of the little cottage and something that might have been thunder rumbled in from far away.

THE afternoon was a nightmare.

Gordon Collier stood at the window and watched. He didn't want to do it, but something deep within him would not let him turn away. His wife stayed huddled in front of the tri-di, watching a meaningless succession of pointless programs, and doubtless she was better off than he was. But he had to watch, even if it killed him. Dimly, he sensed that it was his responsibility to watch.

There wasn't much to see, of course. The robin's-egg-blue sky had turned an impossible, leaden gray, and the fleecy white clouds were tinged with a dismal black. The neat green grass seemed to have lost some of its vitality; it looked dead, like the artificial thing that it was. From far above his head—almost to the inner surface of the Bubble, he judged—little flickerings of light played across the sky.

The visual frequencies were being tampered with, that was all. It wouldn't do to get all excited about it.

The sounds were worse. Thunder muttered and rolled down from above. The faint hum of a copter high in the sky changed to a high-pitched screech, the sound of an aircraft out of control and falling. He waited and waited for the crash, but of course it never came. There was only the screech that went on and on and on, forever.

The auditory frequencies were being tampered with, that was all. *It wouldn't do to get all excited about it.*

When the laughing children who were splashing in the old swimming hole began to scream, Gordon Collier shut the window.

He sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. He wanted to shout, throw things, cry, *anything*. But he couldn't. His mind was numb. He could only sit there in the chair by the window and wait for the unknown.

It was almost evening when the rain came. It came in sheets and torrents and splattered on the window panes. It ran down the windows in gurgling rivulets and made puddles in the yard. It was *real* rain.

Gordon Collier looked at the water falling from a place where water could not be and began to whimper with fright.

PRECISELY at nine o'clock, Gordon and Helen dug up two old raincoats out of the hall closet and walked next door through the storm. They rang the doorbell and stood shivering in the icy rain until Mary opened the door and spilled yellow light out into the blackness.

They entered the cottage, which was an exact replica of their own except for the austerely frowning portrait of Grandfather Walters in the front hall. They stood dripping on the rug until Bart came charging in from the living room, grinning with pleasure at seeing them again.

"What a storm!" he said loudly. "Reminds me of the time we played UCLA in a cloudburst — here, let me take your coats."

Gordon clenched his fists helplessly. Bart and Mary weren't facing the situation either; they were simply adapting to it frantically and hoping it would go away. *Well,* his mind demanded, *what else can they do?*

They went through the ritual of playing cards. This time it was bridge instead of poker, but otherwise it was the same. It always was, except for holidays.

Outside, the incredible storm ripped furiously at the cottage. The roof began to leak, ever so slightly, and a tiny drip began to patter away ironically in the middle of the bridge table. No one said anything about it.

Gordon played well enough to keep up appearances, but his mind wasn't on the game. He loaded his pipe with his own ultra-fragrant bourbon-soaked tobacco, and retreated behind a cloud of smoke.

He had himself fairly well under control now. The worst was probably over, for him. He could at least think about it—that was a triumph, and he was proud of it.

Here they were, he thought—four human beings on a moon as big as a planet, three hundred and ninety million miles from the Earth that had sent them there.

Four human beings, encased in two little white cottages under an air bubble on the rock and ice that was Ganymede. Here they were—waiting.

Waiting for the ship from home that was not due for five months. Waiting all alone in an abandoned solar system, with only sound effects and visual gimmicks for company. Waiting in an empty universe, sustained by a faith in something that had almost been lost.

They were skeleton crews, waiting for the firm flesh to come and clothe their bones. It would not happen today, and it would not happen tomorrow. It might never happen—now.

It was unthinkable that any ship from Earth could be in the vicinity. It was unthinkable that their equipment could have broken down, changed, by itself.

So they were waiting, he thought—but not for the ship from Earth. No, they were waiting for—what?

At eleven o'clock, the storm stopped abruptly and there was total silence.

At midnight, there was a knock on the door.

It was one of those moments that stand alone, cut off and isolated from the conceptual flow of time. It stood quite still, holding its breath.

The knock was repeated — impatiently.

"Someone is at the door," Mary said dubiously.

"That's right," Bart said. "We must have visitors."

No one moved. The four human beings sat paralyzed around the table, their cards still in their hands, precisely as though they were waiting for some imaginary servant to open the door and see who was outside. Gordon Collier found himself relatively calm, but he knew that it was not a natural calmness. He was conditioned too, like the rest of them. He studied them with intense interest. Could they even swallow this insane knock on the door, digest it, fit it somehow into their habitual thought patterns?

Apparently, they could.

"See to the door, dear," Mary told her husband. "I wonder who it could be this time of night?"

The knock was repeated a third time. Whoever — or whatever — was outside, Gordon thought, sounded irritated.

Reluctantly, Bart started to get up. Gordon beat him to it, however, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet. "Let me go," he said. "I'm closer."

He walked across the room to the door. It seemed a longer way than he had ever noticed before. The stout wood door seemed very thin. He put his hand on the door knob, and was dimly conscious of the fact that Bart had gotten up and followed him across the room. He looked at the door, a scant foot before his eyes. The knock came again—sharply, impatiently, a no-nonsense knock. Gordon visualized

the heavy brass door knocker on the other side of the door. To whom, or what, did the hand that worked that knocker belong? Or *was* it a hand?

Almost wildly, Gordon remembered a string of jokes that had made the rounds when he was a boy. Jokes about the little man who turned off the light in the refrigerator when you closed the door. Jokes about a little man—what had they called him?

The little man who wasn't there.

Gordon shook his head. That kind of reaction wouldn't do, he told himself. He had to be calm. He asked himself a question: *What are you waiting for?*

He gritted his teeth and opened the door, fast.

The little man *was* there, and he was tapping his foot. But he was not exactly a little man, either. He was somewhat vague, amorphous —he was, you might say, *almost* a little man.

"It's about time," the almost-man said in a blurred voice. "But first, a word from our sponsor. May I come in?"

Stunned, Gordon Collier felt himself moving aside and the little man hustled past him into the cottage.

The almost-man stood apart from the others, hesitating. He wasn't really a little man, Gordon saw with some relief; that is, he wasn't a gnome or an elf or anything like that. Gordon recognized with a start the state of his own mental processes that had even allowed him to imagine that it *could* be some supernatural creature out there on the green lawn, knocking at the door. He fought to clear his mind, and knew that he failed.

Gordon caught one thought and held on, desperately: *If this is an alien, all that I have worked for is finished. The dream is ended.*

The almost-man — changed. He solidified, became real. He *was* a man—elderly, a bit pompous, neatly dressed in an old-fashioned business suit with a conservative blue tie. He had white hair and a neat, precise moustache. His blue eyes twinkled.

"I am overwhelmed," he said clearly, waving a thin hand in the air. "My name is John. You are too kind to a poor old country boy."

Gordon stared. The man was a dead ringer for the portrait of Grandfather Walters on the wall.

Bart and Mary and Helen just looked blankly at the man, trying to adjust to the enormity of what had happened. Bart had resumed his seat at the bridge table, and had even picked up his hand. Helen was watching Gordon, who still stood by the door. Mary sat uncertainly, dimly realizing that she was the hostess here, and waiting for the proper stimulus that would prod her into a patterned routine of welcome. The house waited—a stage set for a play, with the actors all in place and the curtain half-way up.

Gordon Collier slammed the

door, fighting to clear his mind from the gentle fog that lapped at it, that made everything all right. "What in the hell is the big idea?" he asked the man who looked like Grandfather Walters and whose name was John.

"Gordey!" exclaimed Helen.

"That's no way to talk to company," Mary said.

John faced Gordon, ignoring the others. His moustache bristled. He spread his hands helplessly. "I am a simple wayfaring stranger," he said. "I happened to pass by your door, and since you live in a house by the side of the road, I assumed that you would wish to be a friend to man."

Gordon Collier started to laugh hysterically, but smothered it before the laughter exploded nakedly into the room. "*Are* you a man?" he asked.

"Certainly not," John said indignantly.

Gordon Collier clenched his fists until his fingernails drew blood from the palms of his hands. He tried to use his mind, to free it, to fight. He could not, and he felt the tears of rage in his eyes. *I must,* he thought, *I must, I must, I MUST.*

He closed his eyes. The ritual had been broken, the lulling pattern was no more. He told himself: *Somewhere in this madness there is a pattern that will reduce it to sanity. It is up to me to find it; that is why I am here. I must fight this thing, whatever it is. I must clear my mind and I must fight. I must get behind the greasepaint and the special effects and deal with whatever is underneath. This is the one test I must not fail.*

"Would you care for a drink?" he asked the man who looked like Grandfather Walters.

"Not particularly," John told him. "In fact, the thought appalls me."

Gordon Collier turned and walker out into the kitchen, took a bottle of Bart's best Scotch out of the cupboard, and drank two shots straight. Then he methodically mixed a Scotch and soda, and stood quite still, trying to think.

He *had* to think.

This wasn't insane, he had to remember that. It *seemed* to be, and that was important. Things didn't just happen, he knew; there was always an explanation, if you could just find it. Certainly, these two little cottages out here on Ganymede were fantastic enough unless you knew the story behind them. You would never guess, looking at them, that they were the tail end of a dream, a dream that man was trying to stuff back into the box . . .

Again, the thought came: *If this is an alien, all that I have worked for is finished. The dream is ended.* And a further thought: *Unless they never find out, back on Earth.*

Those thoughts. They drummed so insistently through his mind. Were they his, really? Or were they, too, part of the conditioning?

He shook his head. He could not think clearly; his mind was clogged. He would have to feel his way along.

He was desperately aware that he was not reacting rationally to the situation in which he found himself. None of it made sense; there was too much trickery. But how could he cut through to the truth?

He didn't know.

He *did* know that there was danger with him in the house, danger that was beyond comprehension.

He tried to be calm. He walked back into the living room to face the three people who were less than human and the strange man who had walked in out of infinity.

Gordon Collier entered the room and stopped. He forced his mind to accept the scene in matter-of-fact terms. He reached out for reality and held on tight.

There was the bridge table, and there Helen and Mary and Bart, their cards in their hands, caught between action and non-action. There was the homey furniture, and the knickknacks on the mantelpiece over the non-functional fireplace. Out in the kitchen, the frigidaire wheezed. There was the line of poetry: *Let me live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man.* There was the portrait of old Grandfather Walters.

There sat the man named *John*, who *was* Grandfather Walters, down to the last precise hair in his white moustache, the last wrinkle in his dreary gray business suit.

Outside, in a night alive with shadows, there was no sound at all.

"You have returned, as time will allow," John said. "No doubt you have your questions ready." He lit a cigarette, and the brand he smoked had not existed for twenty years. He dropped ashes on the rug.

"I can ask you questions, then," Gordon Collier said hesitantly.

"Certainly, my man. Please do. Valuable prizes."

Gordon frowned, not caring for the phrase "my man." And the oddly misplaced tri-di jargon was disconcerting, vaguely horrible. He fought to clear his mind.

"Are you our friend?"

"No."

"Our enemy?"

"No."

The three people at the bridge table watched, unmoving.

"Are you trying to—ummm—conquer the Earth?"

"My good man, what on Earth for?"

Gordon Collier tried to ignore the pun. It didn't fit. Nothing fitted. That was why he could not force his mind to see it all objectively, then. It was completely outside his experience, all of it.

Somewhere there is a pattern—

"What is this all about? What is going on?"

John's blue eyes twinkled. He lit another cigarette, dropping the other one on the rug and grinding

it out with his neatly polished black shoe. He said: "I have already told you that I am not a man. It follows that I am, from your point of view, an alien. I have nothing to hide. My actions are irrational to you, just as yours are to me. You are, in a way, a preliminary to food. There, is that clear?"

Gordon Collier stared at the man who looked like Grandfather Walters. *If this is an alien—*

His mind rebelled at the thought. It was absurd, fantastic. He tried to find another explanation, ignoring the shrieking danger signals in his mind. Suppose, now, that this was all a trick, a monstrous trick. John was not an alien at all—of course he wasn't—but a clever agent from Earth, out to wreck the dream.

"You say that you are an alien," he told John. "Prove it."

John shrugged, dropping ashes into the little pile on the rug. "The best proof would be highly unpleasant for you," he said. "But I can—the words are difficult, we're a little late folks — take a story out of your mind and—the words are very hard—project it back to you again. Will that be good enough?"

"Prove it," Gordon Collier repeated, trying to be sure of himself. "Prove it."

John nodded agreeably. He looked around him, smiling.

The clock in the hall struck two.

Gordon Collier sat down. He leaned forward. . . .

He saw a ship. It was very cold and dark. He saw—shadows—in the ship. He followed the ship. It had no home. It was nomadic. It fed on energy that it—absorbed—from other cultures. He saw one of the — shadows — more clearly. There were many shadows. They were watching him. He strained forward, could almost see them —

"I beg your pardon," John said loudly. "How clumsy of me."

The room was taut with fear.

"If at first you don't succeed," John said languidly, "try, try again. Let's see, my man—where shall we start?"

The question was rhetorical. Gordon Collier felt a jolt hit his mind. He felt himself slipping, tried to hold on. He failed. It began to come, out of the past.

Disjointed, at first. Jerky headlines, and then more . . .

MAN CONQUERS SPACE!

YANK SHIP LANDS ON MOON!

NEXT STOP MARS SCIENTIST SAYS!

There had been more, under the headlines. Articles about how the space stations were going to end war by a very logical alchemy. Articles about rockets and jets and atomics. Articles about how to build a nice steel base on the moon.

Gordon Collier laughed aloud and then stopped, suddenly. The three people at the bridge table stared at him mindlessly. John stabbed in his brain . . .

They had chattered away quite

glibly about weightlessness and gravity strains. They had built a perfect machine.

But there had been an imperfect machine inside it.

His name was man.

There were imperfect machines outside it, too. Villages and towns and cities filled to overflowing with them. Once the initial steps had been taken, once man was really in space at last, the reaction came. The true enormity of the task became all too obvious.

Space stations didn't cure wars, of course, any more than spears or rifles or atomic bombs had cured wars. Wars were culturally determined patterns of response to conflict situations; to get rid of wars, you had to change the pattern, not further implement it.

Space killed men. It sent them shrieking into the unknown in coffins of steel. It ripped them out of their familiar, protective cultures and hurled them a million miles into Nothing.

Space wasn't profitable. It gobbled up millions and billions into its gaping craw and it was never satiated. It didn't care about returning a profit. There was no profit to return.

Space was for the few. It was expensive. It took technical skills and training as its only passport. It was well to speak of dreams, but this dream had to be paid for. It took controls and taxes. Who paid the taxes? Who wanted the controls?

I work eight hours a day in a factory, the chorus chanted into the great emptiness. *I got a wife and kids and when I come home at night I'm too tired to dream. I work hard. I earn my money. Why should I foot the bill for a four-eyed Glory Joe?*

Space was disturbing. Sermons were spoken against it. Editorials were written against it. Laws were enacted against it—subtle laws, for controls were not wanted.

The rockets reached Luna and beyond—Mars and Venus and the far satellites of Jupiter and Saturn. Equipment was set up, the trail was blazed at last.

But who would follow the trail? Where did it go? What did it get you when you got there?

Starburn leaves scars on the soul. Some men could not give up. Some men knew that man could not turn back.

Starburned men knew that dreams never really die.

They dwelt in fantastic loneliness, many of them, waiting. They waited for a few of their fellows on Earth to win over a hostile planet with advertising and lectures and closed-door sessions with industrialists. They fought to lay the long-neglected foundations for a skyscraper that already teetered precariously up into the sky and beyond.

Far out in space, the fragile network of men and ships held on tight and hoped.

"Let us revert to verbal com-

munication again," John said with startling suddenness. "Projection is quite tiring."

Gordon Collier jerked back to the present and tried to adjust. He was aware, dimly, that he was being played with consummate skill. He thought of a fish that knew it had a hook in its mouth. What could he do about it? He tried to think. . . .

"Of course," John went on—quite smoothly now—and lighting yet another cigarette, "your scientists, if I may apply the word to them, belatedly discovered that they could not simply isolate a man, or a man and a woman, in a steel hut on an alien world and go off and leave him for six months or a year, to employ your ethnocentric time scale. A man is so constituted that he is naked and defenseless without his culture, something he can live by and believe in."

Gordon Collier gripped his empty glass until he thought the glass would shatter. Could this man be reading his thoughts? A word came to him: *hypnosis*. It sounded nice. He tried to believe in it.

"In the long run, you see," John continued, "it is the totality of little things that goes to make up a culture. A man such as yourself does not simply sit in a room; he sits in a room of a familiar type, with pictures on the walls and dust in the corners and lamps on the tables. A man does not just eat; he eats special kinds of food that he has been conditioned to want, served as he has been trained to want them to be served, in containers he is accustomed to, in a social setting that he is familiar with, that he fits into, that he *belongs* in. All intelligent life is like that, you see."

Gordon waited, trying to think. He had almost had something there, but it was slipping away. . . .

"Someone had to stay in space, of course," John said, dropping more ashes on the rug. "Someone had to man the stations and look after the equipment, and there was a more subtle reason; it was a distinct psychological advantage to have men already *in* space, to prove that it could be done. The machines couldn't do everything, unfortunately for you, and so someone had to stay out here, and he had to stay sane—sane by your standards, of course."

Gordon Collier looked across at the three people who sat as though frozen around the forgotten bridge table, staring at him with blank dead-fish eyes. Helen, his wife. Bart and Mary. Sane? What did that mean? What was the price of sanity?

"And so," John continued in a bored voice, "man took his culture with him—the more provincial and reassuring and fixed the better. He took little white cottages and neighborly customs, rooted them up out of their native soil, sealed them in cylinders of steel, and rocketed them off to barren

little worlds of ice and darkness. I must say, Collier, that your mind has a frightfully melodramatic way of looking at things. Perhaps that was why the little white cottages and the neighbors were not enough; in any event, conditioning was also necessary. No person operating at his full level of perception could possibly enact this farce you are living out here. And yet, without the farce you go mad. It is difficult to imagine a people less suited to space travel, don't you agree?"

Gordon Collier shrugged, feeling the cold sweat gathering in the palms of his hands.

"And there you are," John said, lighting another cigarette. "They are *much* milder. I have tried to demonstrate projection to you, on several different levels. I hope you will excuse the scattered editorial comments?"

Gordon Collier defensively reached out for a single line of reasoning and clung to it. If this were an alien, and the news got back to Earth, then the dream of space travel was finished. An advanced race already in space, added to all the other perils, would be the last straw. He, Gordon Collier, had dedicated his life to the dream. Therefore, it could not end. Therefore, John was human. It was all a trick.

His mind screamed its warning, but he thrust it aside.

He leaned forward, breathing hard. "I'll excuse them," he said slowly, "but I'll also call you a liar."

Outside, the night was still.

The sound had been turned off.

There was no storm now — no rain, nor thunder, nor lightning. There was no wind, not even whispers of a summer breeze. There were no crickets, and no night rustlings in the stuff that looked like grass.

Bart and Mary and Helen sat uncertainly at their bridge table, trying to somehow adapt themselves to a situation that they were in no way prepared to face. It wasn't their fault, Gordon knew. They had not been conditioned to handle *new* elements. That was his job. That was what he had been chosen for. He was the change factor, the mind that had been left free enough to function.

But not wholly free. He felt that keenly, here in the room with the man called John. He was fuzzy and approximate. He needed to be clear and exact. He tried to believe he had figured it all out. *Hypnosis.* That was a good word.

He hoped that it was good enough.

"A liar?" The man who looked like Grandfather Walters laughed in protest and blew smoke in Collier's eyes. "The projection was incorrect?"

Collier shook his head, ignoring the smoke, trying not to be distracted. "The information was correct. That proves nothing."

John arched his bushy eyebrows. "Oh? Come now, my man."

"Look here," Gordon Collier said decisively, believing it now. "You look like a man to me. All I have to contradict my impression is your unsupported statement and some funny tricks that can be explained in terms of conditioning and hypnosis. If you came from Earth, as you obviously did, then you would know the story as well as I do. The rest is tricks. The real question is: who sent you here, and why?"

It was cold in the room. Why was it so cold?

John deftly added more ashes to the small mountain at his feet. "Your logic is excellent, if primitive," he said. "The trouble with logic is that its relationship with reality is usually obscure. It *is* logical that I am from Earth. It is not, however, true."

"I don't believe you," Gordon Collier said.

John smiled patiently. "The trouble is," he said, "that you have a word, 'alien,' and no concept to go with it. You persist in reducing me to non-alien terms, and I assure you that I will not reduce. I am, by definition, not human."

The doubt came again, gnawing at him. He fought himself. He felt an icy chill trip along his spine. He tried to convince himself and he said: "There is a reason for the storms and the build-up and the screams. I think it is a human reason. I think you have been sent here by the interests on Earth who are fighting space expansion, to try to scare us off. I think you're a good actor, but I don't think you're good enough."

The thought came again: *If this is an alien . . .*

Nonsense.

Helen, at the bridge table, suddenly stirred. She said, "My, but it's late." That was all.

John ignored her. "I assure you," he said, "that I have not the slightest interest in whether your little planet gets into space or not. Your ethnocentrism is fantastic. Can't you see, man? I don't care, not at all, not in any particular. It just isn't part of my value system."

"Go back and tell them it didn't work," Gordon Collier said.

"Oh no," John said, shocked. "I'm spending the night."

The silence tautened.

Mary moved at the bridge table. The button had been punched, and she tried to respond. "Bart," she said, "set up the spare bed for the nice man."

Bart didn't move.

"You're not staying," Gordon Collier said flatly. He shook his head. He was so confused. If only—

John smiled and lit another cigarette from his endless supply. "I really must, you know," he said cheerfully. "Look at it this way. The star cluster to which you refer as *the* galaxy—quaint of you—is inhabited by a multitude of diverse cultural groups. A moment's reflection should show you that uniformity of organization over so

vast a territory is impossible. The problem of communications alone would defeat such a plan, even were it desirable, which it isn't.

"One of these cultures, of which I happen to be a member, has no territorial identification, except with space itself. Our ship is our home. We are, in a manner of speaking, nomads. Our economy, since we produce nothing, is based upon what we are able to extract from others."

Gordon Collier listened to his heart. It drummed liquidly in his ears.

"The closest similarity I can find in your mind is that of the ancient Plains Indians in the area you think of as North America," John continued, his blue eyes sparkling. "How charming that you should regard them as primitive! Sedentary economies are so dull, you know. We have become rather highly skilled, if I do say so myself, at imitating dominant life forms. Contacting aliens for preliminary 'typing' is a prestige mechanism with us, just as counting *coup* served an analogous purpose among your Plains Indians, when a brave would sneak into an enemy camp at night and touch a sleeping warrior or cut loose a picketed horse. This gave him prestige in his tribe, and without it he was nothing; he had no status. With us there is a further motive. Suppose, to extrapolate down to your level, you wish to pick apples. It will be to your advantage, then, to try to look and act like the farmer who owns them, will it not? Our culture has found it expedient to 'type' members of an alien culture in a controlled situation, before setting out to, so to speak, pick apples in earnest. The individual who does the 'typing' gains prestige in proportion to the danger involved. Am I getting through to you?"

Gordon Collier got to his feet, slowly. He could not think, not really. In a way, he realized this. He tried to go ahead regardless, to do what he could. His brain supplied a thought: *What would the ship from Earth pick up five months from tonight in this silent cottage? Would it be human beings—or something else?*

Of course, John was a human being.

A hypnotist, perhaps.

Why was it so cold in the house?

He started for the man called John, slowly, step by step. He did not know why he did it; he only knew that he had to act, act now, act before it was too late, act despite the cost. The impulse came from down deep, beyond the conditioning.

"You're a liar," he said again, biting the words out thickly, believing in them. "You're a liar. We don't believe in you. Get out, get out, get *out*—"

If this is an alien, the dream is ended. Unless—

The man called John slid out of his chair and backed away. His blue eyes glittered coldly. The cig-

arette between his fingers shredded itself to the floor, squeezed in two.

"Stop," said John.

Gordon Collier kept on coming.

The man called John—changed.

Gordon Collier screamed.

It was an animal scream.

He staggered back, back against the wall. His eyes were shut, jammed shut as tightly as he could force them. His mouth was open, to let the endless scream rip and tear itself out from the matrix of his being. He cowered, crouched against the wall, a creature in agony.

He was afraid that he would not die.

His hands shook, and they were clammy with the cold sweat that oozed from his palms. A white flash of indescribable pain seared up from his toes, burned like molten lead through his body. It hissed along his naked nerves and howled into his cringing brain with the numbing, blinding impact of a razor-sharp chisel on a rotten tooth. Blood trickled wetly from his nostrils.

He clawed the floor, not feeling the splinters in his nails.

The scream screeched to a piercing climax that bulged his eyes from their sockets.

Something snapped.

His body relaxed, trembling quietly. His mind was clean and empty, like a flower washed with the summer rain. He breathed in great choking mouthfuls of air. He remembered—

It had *bubbled.*

He shut it out. He lay quite still for a long minute, letting the life wash warmly back through his veins. His breathing slowed. He felt a tiny thrill of triumph course through his body.

His mind was clean.

He could think again.

He took a deep breath and turned around.

The cottage was still there. The frigidaire wheezed in the kitchen. The living room was unchanged. There were the chairs, the tri-di, the picture of Grandfather Walters, the ashes on the rug, the three motionless figures at the bridge table. Bart and Mary and Helen.

They were very still.

Yes, of course. Their conditioned minds had been strained past the tolerance point and they had blanked out. Short-circuited. The fuse had blown. They were out of it, for now.

He was alone.

The man called John was seated again in his armchair, blue eyes twinkling, moustache neat and prim, the pile of ashes at his feet. He had lit another cigarette. He was smiling, quite himself again.

Or, rather, he was *not* himself again.

Gordon Collier got to his feet. It took him a long time, and he did it clumsily. He was shaken and weak in the knees. He had lost the fuzziness which had partially protected him.

But he had his mind back.

It was, he thought, a fair trade.

"I fear the shock has been too much for your dull friends," John said languidly, crossing his legs carefully so as not to disturb the neat crease in his trousers. "I tried to warn you, you know."

Gordon said: "You can't stay here." The words were thick and he licked his lips with his parched tongue.

John hesitated, but recovered quickly. "On the contrary," he said, "I can and I will. A charming place, really. I'd like to get to know you better."

"I can imagine," said Gordon Collier.

The silence beat at his ears. It was uncanny. He had never heard no-sound before.

Black despair settled within him like cold ink. The situation, he now saw, was frightening in its simplicity. He had to accept it for what it was. The thing was alien. It didn't *care* what the effects of its visit would be on the future of Earth. Human beings were to it what pigs were to a man.

Does the hungry man worry about whether or not pigs have dreams?

"You're going to get out," he told it.

The man called John raised an eyebrow in polite doubt.

Gordon Collier was not sure, now, that man *should* leave the Earth. It was odd, he thought, that his concern was still with the dream. Regardless of his actions here, all the human beings would not be "eaten." Many would escape, and the species would recover. But if this thing, or even any news of it, reached the Earth, then the dream was finished. The whole shaky, crazy structure that had put man into space would collapse like a card house in a hurricane. Man—or what was left of him—would retreat, build a wall around himself, try to hide.

And if he did get into space to stay?

Gordon Collier didn't know. There were no simple answers. If the aliens, or even the intelligence that there *were* such aliens, reached the Earth, then man was through, dead in his insignificance. If not, he had a chance to shape his own destiny. He had won time. It was as simple as that.

Gordon Collier again faced the man called John. He smiled.

Two cultures, locked in a room.

From the bridge table, three sluggish statues turned to watch.

To Gordon Collier, the only sound in the room was that of his own harsh breathing in his ears.

"As I was saying," said the man called John, "I'm afraid I really must ignore your lamentable lack of hospitality and stay on for awhile. I am, you might say, the man who came to dinner. You are quite helpless, Gordon Collier, and I can bring my people here at any time. Enough of them, you see, to fill both your houses and the air bubble beyond. It will be alive

with my people. You are quite helpless, Gordon Collier, and I can bring my people here at any time. Enough of them, you see, to fill . . ."

Gordon Collier refused to listen to the voice that tried to lull him back to sleep. He shut it out of his mind. He had but one weapon, and that was his mind. He had to keep it clear and uncluttered.

John kept talking, melodically.

Gordon Collier tried to think, tried to organize his thoughts, collect his data, relate it to a meaningful whole.

Somewhere there is a pattern.

Several pieces of information, filed away by his conditioned brain until it could assemble them, clicked into place like parts of a puzzle. Now that the fog was gone, a number of facts were clear.

He used his mind, exultantly.

For one thing, of course, the man called John had given him more information than was strictly necessary. Why? Well, he had explained about the prestige mechanism involved—and the more danger there was, the more prestige. An important fact followed: if he, Gordon Collier, were in fact utterly helpless, then there was no danger, and no prestige.

And *that* indicated . . .

". . . lamentable lack of hospitality and stay on for awhile," the voice droned on in his ears. "I am, you might say, the man who came to dinner. You are quite helpless, Gordon Collier, and I can . . ."

So John had armed him with information. He had been playing a game of sorts, a game for keeps. He had given his opponent clues. What were they? *What were they?*

". . . bring my people here at any time. Enough of them, you see . . ."

"The trouble is," John had said, *"that you have a word, 'alien,' and no concept to go with it."*

Gordon Collier stood motionless, between John and the three immobile figures at the bridge table, looking for the string that would untie the knot. John's voice buzzed on, but he ignored it.

From the first, he remembered, John had kept himself apart from the human beings. He had walked in, hesitated, said his stilted tri-di derived introductory remarks, and seated himself as Grandfather Walters. He had remained isolated. He had never come really close to any of the human beings, never touched them.

And when Gordon Collier had advanced on him . . .

Collier stared at the man called John. Was he telepathic, or had he picked up his story before he ever came through the door? Was he listening in on his thoughts even now?

That was unimportant, he realized suddenly. That was a blind alley. It made no practical difference. What counted was a simple fact: the alien could not touch him. And, presumably, it wasn't armed; that would have counterbalanced the danger factor.

It was very cold in the room. Gordon Collier felt a sick thrill in the pit of his stomach.

". . . to fill both your houses and the air bubble beyond. It will be alive . . ."

There was danger for the alien here. There *had* to be. Gordon Collier smiled slowly, feeling the sweat come again to his hands. There could be but one source for that danger.

Himself.

He saw the picture. It was quite clear. All that build-up, all the sounds and the rain and the wind, had been designed to test man in a beautiful laboratory situation. If man proved amenable to "typing," then he was next on the food list.

Pigs.

If he didn't crack, if he fought back even *here* and *now*, then the aliens would have to play their game elsewhere. Death wasn't fun, not even to an alien.

Death was basic.

Yes, it was quite clear what he had to do. He didn't know that he could do it, but he could try. He was weak on his legs and there was a cold shriek of memory that would not stay buried in his mind. He bit his lip until he felt the salt taste of blood in his mouth. He was totally unprotected now, and he knew the price he would have to pay.

He smiled again and walked slowly toward the man called John, step by steady step.

Gordon Collier lived an eternity while he crossed the room. He felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare that kept repeating itself over and over and over again.

The six dead eyes at the bridge table followed him.

"Stop," said John.

Gordon Collier kept coming.

The man called John slid out of his chair and backed away. His blue eyes were cold with fear and fury.

"Stop," he said, his voice too high.

Gordon Collier kept coming.

That was when John—changed.

Gordon Collier screamed—and kept on walking. He shaped his screaming lips into a smile and kept on walking. He felt the sickness surge within him and he kept on walking.

Closer and closer and *closer.*

He screamed and while he screamed his mind clamped on one thought and did not let go: *if that seething liquid hell is hideous to me, then I am equally hideous to it.*

He kept walking. He kept his eyes open. His foot stepped into the convulsive muck on the floor. He stopped. He screamed louder. He reached out his hand to *touch* it. It bubbled icily . . .

He knew that he would touch it if it killed him.

The thing—cracked. It contracted with lightning speed into half its former area. It got away. It boiled furiously. It shot into a

"He knew that he would touch it if it killed him."

corner and stained the wall. It tried to climb. It heaved and palpitated. It stopped, advanced, wavered, advanced—

And retreated.

It flowed convulsively, wriggling, under the door.

Gordon Collier screamed again and again. He looked at the three dead-alive statues at the bridge table and sobbed. He was wrenched apart.

But he had won.

He collapsed on the floor, sobbing. His face fell into the mound of dry gray ashes by the armchair.

He had won. The thought was far, far away . . .

One of the statues that had been his wife stirred and somehow struggled to her feet. She padded into the bedroom and got a blanket. She placed it gently over his sobbing body.

"Poor dear," said Helen, "He's had a hard day."

Outside, there was a whistle and a roar, and then the pale light of dawn flowed in and filled the sky.

THE five minths passed, and little seemed changed.

There was only one little white cottage now, and it was on Earth. It snuggled into the Illinois countryside. It had green shutters and crisp curtains on the windows. It had knickknacks on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. It had a fragment of cozy poetry, caught in a dime-store frame . . .

Gordon Collier was alone now, and the loneliness was a tangible thing. His mind was almost gone, and he knew that it was gone. He knew that they had put him here to shelter him, to protect him, until he should be strong enough to take the therapy as Helen and Bart and Mary had taken it.

But he knew that he would never be strong enough, never again.

They pitied him. Perhaps, they even felt contempt for him. Hadn't he failed them, despite all their work, all their expert conditioning? Hadn't he gone to pieces with the others and reduced himself to uselessness?

They had read the last notation in the equipment room. Odd that a meteor could unnerve a man so!

He walked across the green grass to the white picket fence. He stood there, soaking up the sun. He heard voices—children's voices. There they were, three of them, hurrying across the meadow. He wanted to call to them, but they were far away and he knew that his voice would not carry.

He stood by the white fence for a very long time.

When darkness came, and the first stars appeared above him, Gordon Collier turned and walked slowly up the path, back to the warmth, and to the little white cottage that waited to take him in.

THE END

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THE SOLUBLE SCIENTIST

By

J. P. Caravan

Wherein the old and evil Professor devises a new and horrible fate for John.

Illustrated by Charles Hornstein

THE old and evil professor of biochemistry and many other subjects was elated. His laughter rang far out over the sea, scaring birds as it went. He was delighted with the results of his latest experiment. He leaped chuckling around a huge vat filled with a nasty looking green liquid and a nasty looking yellow liquid, giving occasional screams of joy when he saw that the two liquids wouldn't mix no matter what he did.

"Look," he shouted to his students. "Observe. There is no possible way to mix these liquids. I have used pressure, heat, agitation, vaporization and every catalyst in the book. I have even used witch-

craft and black magic. I have used everything except human sacrifice to force these two liquids into combination. Ha! There is no way. See? See?" And he danced happily across the laboratory, kicking students as he went.

A student named John held up his hand. "What would happen if they did combine?" he asked.

"Ha!" cried the professor. "It would be a perfect cure for ingrown toenails. But it won't ever happen and so the millions of sufferers will continue to suffer. I have proved it can't happen! Yeek!" And he leaped higher and higher, for he loved to think of continued suffering. "There will never be a cure for ingrown toenails until these two liquids combine."

"And they can't combine?" asked John.

"Right!" screamed the old scientist.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? I am always sure. I am a genius."

"So am I," muttered John. "At least, my wife is."

Now John's wife was the evil old professor's daughter, and the professor hated her with a bright purple hatred. He hated John with a bright red hatred, and he hated the rest of the world with a pale pink hatred, so you can see how much he hated his daughter and his son-in-law. "John," he said, "I will make a deal with you. If you find a way—but there is no way—to mix these two liquids, I will pass you for the term and let you graduate. If you cannot find a way—and there is no way—to mix them, I will have you expelled at once. You have twelve hours. I suggest you pack. Goodbye."

"Wait," cried John. "I have not agreed. The thing is impossible."

"I didn't say you had to agree. It was I who made the stipulations, and it is I who will fail you. I intend to fail you anyhow, but I will give you this chance to pass." This was mean, for the professor knew that a futile hope was more cruel than no hope at all.

"Hmmm," said John, scratching his head—a habit he had picked up one day when the professor had temporarily turned him into an ape—"I guess I have to accept. What catalysts did you try?"

The evil old scientist leaped for joy. "All of them. Everything in the book, every chemical there is. Give up, John." He flung a portable oscilloscope at a student who had his hand raised. "Put that hand down," he snarled. "Ask your questions somewhere else."

"Every catalyst?" asked John.

"Every one."

The student cautiously raised his hand again. "What's a catalyst?" he asked, ducking under the table just in time to miss a pack of Rorschach cards which came flying across the room at him.

"Pick those up," said the scientist angrily. "I play solitaire with 'em to settle my nerves." He waited

until the poor student had brought the cards back to his desk and then bashed him on the head with a square wave signal generator. "Anybody else who doesn't know what a catalyst is?" He looked out at a forest of hands. "Fools," he snarled, which was unfair, for—though he was a professor—he never taught his students anything but fear. "You're a senior, John. Tell them." And he rushed around the classroom, laughing happily at the thought of failing and expelling John while millions of sufferers suffered from relentless ingrown toenails.

"Well," said John. "Er . . ." He juggled a piece of chalk. "Ah . . ." He cleared his throat. He coughed. He strangled a bit and pounded himself on the back. He blushed. "Uh . . ."

"Excellent," muttered the evil old professor.

"Look . . . Er . . . You take . . . I mean . . . It's difficult to explain. You take two elements that won't combine . . . No . . . That's not it exactly." He turned to the blackboard. "Look. Take C_2H_5OH. Take two molecules of it. You can break it down to C_2H_5-O-C_2H_5 plus H_2O. It's simple. You just heat it. Nothing to it chemically. You can see how the OH radical drops off the C_2H_5. Now you started with two molecules, so you have two of these oxygen-hydrogen units to account for: two hydrogen radicals and two oxygen radicals. One of the oxygens makes the O between the two C_2H_5's and the other hooks up with the two spare H radicals to make the water molecule." He turned back to the class. "I hope this isn't boring."

The professor stopped leaping around the room. "Never worry about boring your pupils," he said. "Bored students fall asleep and don't make any trouble. So far you've been completely wrong. You can't do the experiment simply by the application of heat."

"I was leading up to that," said John, throwing his chalk at the professor. "You can heat it all day Thursday and it won't break down and recombine the way you want it to. What you do is add the catalyst. A catalyst is a substance in whose presence a chemical change will take place that won't perceptably proceed without it. At the end of the experiment you get your catalyst back unchanged. Simply add sulphuric acid to your test tube and the thing will work perfectly."

"So your problem is to find a catalyst to make that nasty green liquid combine with that nasty yellow liquid to make an ingrown-toenail cure," said one of the students.

And from the back of the room the evil old professor's laughter rang out happily. "Right!" he shrieked. "But he can't find any because I tried 'em all. By the way, I plan to fail everyone in the class when I fail John. He has less than eleven hours left. Goodbye." And

he rushed from the room.

Well, as you may imagine, John spent the next ten hours and fifty-nine minutes in trying everything he could think of to make the two liquids in the huge vat combine with one another. He tried sulphuric acid and platinum wires and snowballs and tungsten and the rare earths and berkelium and hydrogen, he tried illuminating gas and gumdrops, he tried acids and bases and salts, he even tried swearing and kicking the side of the vat. Nothing worked.

Finally, as he heard the evil footsteps of the professor approaching down the hall, he turned to the students gathered around him. "*Mes amis,*" he said, "*Il me faut . . .*"

"Hey," somebody said. "Talk louder. I can't understand you."

"I'm sorry," said John. "I was confused. I've been tearing my brains apart to find a catalyst but I've failed. There is only one thing more to try." He drew himself up. "My friends, it is necessary for me to make the supreme sacrifice. Farewell. Somebody tell my wife."

Turning, he leaped into the huge vat.

What did you expect? It worked.

John was the perfect catalyst. The two liquids, the green one and the yellow one, burbled and churned and flowed together to make a beautiful transparent blue fluid that bubbled merrily.

There was only one trouble; John dissolved.

Human sacrifice was the only thing the evil old professor hadn't tried. Scientists aren't so smart; sometimes they overlook obvious things like that, simple things. That's what makes them mad.

There was nobody madder than the mad scientist when he rushed into the laboratory and saw that John had suceeeded.

"He has succeeded! How? How? How?" And he began to strangle himself in his fury. "Where is he?" He cursed a curse so horrible it turned two students into jackrabbits who hopped frantically away from his flailing feet. "Where is John?" he cried, almost incoherent from anger. "Tell me, tell me, tell me, Elmer."

And the sad student named Elmer, the one who had been bashed over the head for asking what a catalyst was, pointed mournfully at the vat of blue liquid. "In there," he said. "Dissolving. He asked us to tell his wife."

"Dissolving?" shouted the professor, turning mottled for joy. "Is that little lump of stuff John?" His face was the color of a scrambled egg sprinkled with cod liver oil, and he leaped high into the air and did two back flips. "Look at him go!" he cried. "In seven minutes he'll be completely used up. Yeek! Yeek!" This was true: John was dissolving so rapidly that in seven minutes there would be nothing left except a fading memory and a heap of old examination papers. Of course, there wasn't much of John

left as it was, for he had already been dissolving for some time, but seven minutes would finish the job. "Tell his wife!" cried the professor. "I want her to come and see this. Run! Hurry! Quick!" And he laughed such a loud and bitter laugh that the students rushed out of the room in a panic and fled screaming across the campus.

In a few minutes John's beautiful wife had reached the laboratory and had climbed up beside the huge vat. "Ha!" cried her father, the old and evil professor. "Look! There goes John. Now you will starve in the cold and the snow and the hurricanes. Look! Ha!"

As she peered down into the bubbling burbling bright blue lively lovely looking liquid, an eyeball popped up to the surface. It was an eyeball with one small glistening tear in it, an eyeball with a sad and noble look in it, an eyeball slightly bloodshot from the fatigue of almost eleven hours of constant unsuccessful search for a catalyst, an eyeball that gazed solemnly at her, a familiar eyeball that seemed to wink once, an eyeball—John's eyeball—that dissolved with an audible pop!

"Seven minutes!" cried the professor. "That's the end of John. Yeek! Yeek!" And he peered down into the liquid to see if there were any parts of John which hadn't fully dissolved yet.

"My goodness," said John's wife, "it's a good thing I didn't come any later or I would have missed seeing him go. The eyeball would naturally be the last thing to dissolve: eyeballs are largely sclero-proteins and of course they have to be hydrolized before they'll enter into solution."

"Naturally," snarled the old and evil scientist, who hadn't thought of this. "That's the end of John." And he rubbed his bony hands together and leaped across the room to his desk. "I will keep my promise. I told him that if he succeeded in mixing the two liquids I would pass him. Ha! Perhaps we can have a small graduated beaker full of this blue liquid at the commencement exercises. John will probably be the first student ever to receive his Bachelor of Science degree while dissolved in ingrown toenail cure. Yeek! Now I can get on with my hobby without interference."

John's wife shuddered when she heard this, for she knew that her father's hobby was collecting ways of ending the earth.

"Get out!" he cried. "Go out into the cruel world and starve! And take your memories of him and these old examination papers. Go!" He pointed one gnarly finger at the door. "John is dead."

"Not dead," said a moist voice from the vat, "merely somewhat dissolved."

The professor whirled.

John's wife whirled.

Three books fell from the wall.

"John!" cried the professor.

"John!" cried John's wife.

"Hello," said John. He climbed

down from the rim of the vat and stood dripping on the floor.

"But you dissolved," cried the professor.

"I saw you dissolve," cried the girl.

"Sure," said John. "But I didn't stay dissolved. And my ingrown toenails are cured."

The evil old scientist was too furious to speak, and John's wife was too delighted to speak, so Raphael, who was a parrot that lived in a cage under the professor's desk where he could be kicked whenever no students were handy, poked his head out and asked: "How come you didn't stay dissolved? How come? Ha?"

John gave him a cracker. "Look here, Raphael. Did you see that formula I put on the blackboard when the class was here?"

"Awrk."

"That was the dehydration of alcohol to make ether. We had to use sulphuric acid as a catalyst, but you saw how we got all our sulphuric acid back after the experiment was over."

"Naturally," shouted the professor. "Even this stupid parrot knows that a catalyst doesn't enter into the reaction."

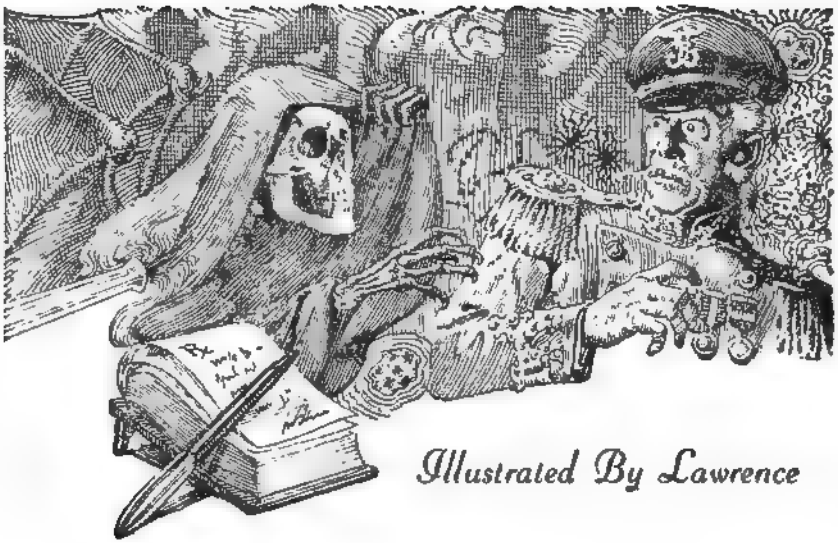
"Awrk," said Raphael.

"Ah," said John, "but it does. If you'd stop kicking holes in the ceiling you'd remember that it does enter the reaction in some cases where we can prove it easily. That experiment I put on the blackboard, for example: alcohol, C_2H_5OH, in the presence of sulphuric acid, H_2SO_4, breaks down to form ether, C_2H_5, and water, H_2O, leaving you with the same sulphuric acid that you started out with; but if you stop the reaction in the middle you'll find that you can isolate $C_2H_5HSO_4$ and water. See? The catalyst enters into the reaction to form an intermediate stage, but it gets put back into its old form when the end-product is reached. That's what happened to me: I was the catalyst that supported the reaction while the two liquids mixed, but when the mixing was completed I was reassembled in my old form."

John turned to his wife. "So now we've got this vast vat full of ingrown toenail cure and the professor has passed me for the term, which is nice of him. Let's go home and build a wall to hang my diploma on." Laughing, they ran from the lab.

The old and evil professor slowly knelt down and began to bash his head against the floor.

THE END



The Man with the Broken Nose

By Wilson O. Clough

It was a strange epidemic, and the Commission chose a strange way of handling it; they turned the problem over to Chief Chemist Manich and Dr. Rosen. It was a medical problem, and Manich wasn't a doctor; Rosen was, it's true, but for years he had been imprisoned as an enemy of the State. Rosen and Manich, so unalike, but they had one thing in common—memories of Dunkelt.

THE man with the oddly angular nose made a swift, warning gesture toward the door. The other seized a checker board from the floor and placed it on his knees. They sat in the exact center of the room.

When the door flew open, and a leering, formidable face was thrust in under a military cap, two heads lifted in surprise from a checker game.

"So!" said the ugly face, coming into the room atop a burly body, hands thrust into a broad, black belt. "So; a little game, that is all."

"That is all," said the man with the nose, shortly.

You noticed his nose almost at once. It jutted swiftly from the brows, then took a sharp, angular turn downward, and ended in a thin, strong way. It went curiously well with the sensitive mouth, the angular chin, the sternly-edged jaw. It was an Egyptian sort of nose, faintly reminiscent of the mummy of Ramases; a Dantesque sort of head altogether, less melancholy, less poetic, a little more assertive, but, like most faces of this city, sharpened by undernourishment.

The coarse face of the intruder was belligerent. He glared at the two with outthrust jaw, heavily wary, animal-like. Then he relaxed slightly.

"I know you," he said to the second man. "Munitions worker. Who is this fellow? Why two in your room? You know the rules."

They looked at the man with the nose. He very calmly drew from his inner pocket a folder with several papers, and passed them over to the sergeant. He did not look up. The sergeant, wavering between anger and respect, snatched them with a long stare, and examined them.

"So," he said at last. "Chemist at the Bureau."

"Chief chemist," the other corrected him, quietly, still studying the checker board.

"Hmm," grunted the sergeant, unwillingly respectful. "How long?"

"Seven months. Our Leader's approval on the appointment."

"Papers seem all right," said the sergeant, returning them, and eyeing the chemist warily. "It's my duty, you know."

"And quite right," said the chemist. "You know your duty well. No one can deny that."

The sergeant relaxed under the praise, yet continued to eye the chemist speculatively. If the chemist was uneasy, he did not show it. He drew a large handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose vigorously, then moved a draughtsman. Suddenly he looked up at the sergeant.

"Tell me, sergeant," he said, "why do you burst in on a worker this way? Don't you know Worker Jounss as a member of the party, in good standing?"

He did not raise his voice, but spoke almost as if chiding the

sergeant good-humoredly. The worker looked apprehensive, yet held himself with a certain confidence, knowing that he was not the central figure.

"Sure, I know him," said the sergeant, defensively. "But when I see another person, unknown to me, entering this building—two or three is always dangerous. That's the rule. No offense can be taken by a good party member."

"And quite right," said the chemist again, rising. "You are well informed. I must return to my office. I know this worker. I vouch for him."

"Just a minute. What were you two talking about? I must ask that, for my report."

The chemist looked at the worker. "What were we saying? Oh, yes, we were remarking that the future of our country will be great once more. Was that not it, Worker Jounss?"

"Why, yes, it was," the worker replied, anxious to remain unnoticed.

The sergeant was not satisfied. "I must ask also why you came here. There are my orders."

"Easily answered, sergeant. I am investigating Worker Jounss for a position in my Bureau. And now, if the examination is over —" The chemist turned toward the door.

"You're a cool one, Mr. Chemist," said the sergeant, "for one not in party uniform. Mind you, I know my place and my duties, and I make no complaint. But you are a cool one."

"Our State!" The chemist saluted sharply.

"Our State!" the other two replied, as the chemist turned away.

"Wait a minute. I'll accompany you—with your permission," said the sergeant. "I wish to talk with you further."

"As you wish," said the chemist, a faint surprise in his voice. The two went down the stairs, heavy boots beside a lighter tread. The worker closed the door behind them, mopping his brow.

THE chemist awaited the first word from the sergeant. Nothing was said as they turned into a small city park and sat down on a bench, at the sergeant's gesture. An onlooker might have surmised that the man in citizen garb was under arrest, such being a not uncommon state of affairs in this city under the "Reorganization." If so, the onlooker would have hurried by without a glance.

The chemist appeared even frailer on the street. His clothes hung loosely, and his face had the pallor of indoor life. Only his nose and his nervous hands bespoke restrained energies. His nose loomed like a Balkan promontory. His hands were sinewy and restless, yet not aimless in movement. They might have been

the hands of a surgeon. Even more intimately than his nose, they expressed something personal about him, something individualistic that would never quite conform.

The sergeant felt this something beside him and vaguely resented it. Yet he was impressed, nevertheless. It was a force of a sort, such as he recognized in the Leader. And if the Leader had approved this man's position, a mere sergeant dare not criticize. As he glanced at his companion, he could not decide upon any irregularities forbidden by his narrow code. The surface offered no points for speculation or actual objection. Yet the sergeant frowned.

"You are a chemist," he announced finally. "You know our Leader, then?"

"No, sergeant. The approval was only by stamp, of course."

"Ah. Recommended by the Council, then, no doubt."

"Yes."

"A chemist—then you might be —a learned man."

"Might be? Not even might have been, sergeant. The learned, you know, are gone now."

"True, very true, Mr. Chemist. Too many would not consent to serve our State. Is that not so?"

"Unfortunately, yes, sergeant. And yet our State has need of men of skill."

"Brains must be devoted to our State, the Leader said. They must work for the glory of our State. Otherwise, they can expect no favors."

"You remember well, sergeant. Almost the exact words."

"But—it was of something else that I wished to speak," said the sergeant, haltingly.

"Yes?" asked the chemist, expectantly, a little surprised.

"You must know something of medicine, Mr. Chemist. Have you not studied medicine?"

A shadow passed over the chemist's face, and he glanced keenly at the questioner.

"Medicine?" he said, slowly. "How should I know medicine? I may—I once thought of such a thing—but that was long ago. I was found useful to the Party as a chemist. I am content to be a chemist—in the service of the State."

"Yes, yes, I know," said the sergeant, a little impatiently. "But I ask—do you still know anything of medicine?"

Again the shadow passed over the chemist's face. "Very little, sergeant, very little." He drew forth his handkerchief and blew vigorously.

"Why do you ask me that?" he said, sharply.

"No offense," said the sergeant. "Mr. Chemist, I speak frankly." He looked about. No one was near.

"Of course," said the chemist, holding himself stiffly.

"It is this," said the sergeant. "One of our men is very ill—the

second one in a fortnight—the same thing. Terrible pains in the head, then a kind of stupid sleeping—no use to us at all."

The chemist started. "But why do you tell me this thing?"

"Because—well, the truth is—we are wondering—is it something catching? It seems to be only in our company."

"How should I know? Haven't you a doctor?"

"An old fool. He mutters, 'I am not sure. Once I would have been sure.' He is crazy with—with age. He will be gone, soon."

"So. And is that all he says?"

"Yes. Mutters something about brain fever. Might be that, he says. He's no help."

The chemist pondered deeply. Finally he said, "Sergeant, I do not know why you tell me this. I am no doctor. I am a chemist. Besides, by what authority do you speak to me? Haven't you overstepped this time?"

The sergeant was visibly embarrassed. "Mr. Chemist, you are right," he said. "I have overstepped. But if my Captain were to know that you—that you know some medicine—he might call on you himself. All I ask—permission to mention your name to him."

"My name? And what for? Ah—I see—the Captain sent you?"

The sergeant paled. "Mr. Chemist, it is true that I know—that you were once a student of medicine."

The chemist stared at the gravel path before him. "You have heard of the old Institute—now destroyed. There was a great man there once—he would have told you what you want to know. But your—the Institute, the laboratories, all destroyed. He, too, is gone now."

"It is possible—mind you, I say, merely possible—that the great doctor might have been useful to our State—if he had consented. But it is not for us to decide. If you studied with the great man—you must remember a little medicine?"

"And if I did? Do you suppose I would admit it now? Do you ask for my life, too? No, sergeant, I did not study with the great man. I happen to remember his fame, that is all."

He looked at the sergeant craftily. In this city, no man trusted another. "I admit no knowledge of medicine, my dear sergeant. Furthermore, I have heard you risk your standing to speak without authority to a Chief Chemist of the Party Bureau. It is you who have erred today, sergeant. I am only a chemist. I have offered no information, and asked no questions. But I have learned that all is not well in your company."

The sergeant was definitely ill at ease. He struggled to regain his self-confidence. "You know, Mr. Chemist, that I am always loyal. Surely, to aid a member of the State's troops cannot be

harmful, for either of us."

"How does your report of this interview read, sergeant?"

"My report"—the sergeant was recovering himself—"my report makes no mention of any Institute or great doctor. It merely says that I encountered the Chief Chemist in the room of a worker, and asked his papers. That is all."

"And what did the Chemist have to say?"

"Only what I have said. That he was Chief Chemist, examining a worker for his Bureau. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Only, if I may suggest to my Captain—on my own—that this Chemist could be asked to examine our two sick men."

"Perhaps the Chemist was encountered on a park bench, resting at noon. Why bring suspicion on a good worker?"

"Yes—yes, the Chemist was encountered at noon. That is it."

"Good. Now that the incident is clear—your Captain will know what authority he has. But it is understood that I am no doctor, and I have no desire to be taken for one. I cannot help any sick man."

"Agreed. Your name is Chemist—?"

"You know it. Chief Chemist Manich. You will find that I have not lied."

"Naturally. A mere form. We eat this evening at the Cafe Bretna. Be there at a distant table. The Captain will speak to you. Our State!"

"Our State!" said the chemist, surprised at this abrupt conclusion. The sergeant's eyes followed him as he disappeared down a narrow side street, his huge handkerchief at his nose.

THE chemist sat alone at a small table in the Cafe Bretna, a cafe much frequented by the military. Though the city of Blauenberg was not the capitol of this little mountain country, it was second in importance since the recent "Reorganization." Marching boots were no novelty in these days, and the chemist did not raise his head as a group of belted bodies swung by him to larger tables in the rear. But when heavy footsteps paused near him, he looked up to see the sergeant.

"You are the Chief Chemist?" the sergeant asked formally, his face a mask of non-recognition.

"I am," said the chemist, as formally.

"My Captain asks that you follow me," said the sergeant.

"Good," said the chemist, and rose, placing his napkin on the table with fingers that trembled ever so slightly.

They marched to the rear of the room and through a small side door. The sergeant paused at the door. Their eyes met briefly, but without recognition. The

Captain sat at a small table, his arms folded stiffly.

"Your papers," he said shortly.

The chemist produced them without a word. The Captain glanced at them quickly and returned them.

"They are in order," he said. "Mr. Chief Chemist, my records inform me that you were once a student at the former Institute."

"That is true, my Captain. But for a few months only, after which I was assigned to my present duties as a chemist for the Party Bureau."

"You must have, then, some acquaintance with medicine."

"Had, let us say, my Captain—and very little indeed."

"Have or had—no difference. It happens that in my company are two men incapacitated by illness—useless at a time when we need them. May I request that you look at them and make suggestions for their recovery."

"You surprise me, my dear Captain. I am no doctor. Have you no doctor in your regiment?"

The Captain glanced sharply at the chemist. "Do you refuse?" Then he added, "The doctor assigned to us is old and—unfriendly to the Party—almost useless. He will not be with us long. Will you consent to my request?"

The chemist pondered. "My Captain, I am no doctor, only a chemist. I am quite content to remain a chemist, where I have been placed with the Leader's stamp of approval. I do not wish to risk that position. Are good doctors so scarce, then, in this city?"

The Captain did not rise in anger, as might have been expected. Instead, he said, finally, "Mr. Chemist, you are a clever man. Otherwise, you would not have risked so much hesitation. It is true, as you guess, that I am acting without authority from higher up. The truth is—I am in a position of asking your aid. I could obtain authority from my Colonel, but—I hesitate to bother him. Why do you suppose that my sergeant approached you?"

"I have been pondering that very question, my Captain. In his case, I assumed that it was fear, pure and simple—fear of a possible contagious disease in his company—or some plague—"

"Don't suggest it, my dear chemist. But it is a shrewd guess. And why do I speak to you now?"

"That is obviously less simple, my Captain. Let us say that—your excellent record—you do not wish to disturb the Colonel—"

"You are indeed a man of quick understanding—and tactful. My record to date is flawless. And you consent?"

"Let us not move too swiftly, my Captain. You can understand my hesitation. I risk my status by moving into areas where I have no authority. I would suggest

that you ask more official aid."

"You are proving stubborn. And yet—you have a certain case. I am prepared to offer you my protection tonight, and my silence."

"You are generous, my Captain. One thing still puzzles me. Surely, two men are not of such supreme importance. Why do you take this unconventional way?"

The Captain's eyes shifted ever so little. "If this malady," he said, "should prove contagious—starting in my company."

"Ah," said the chemist, "that would be awkward. Are there no other cases that you know of?"

The Captain was perturbed. "Only in my company, as far as I can determine. And if it should be—some plague!" He shuddered. "You will come?"

The chemist drew forth his handkerchief. He did not answer at once. Then he said with apparent irrelevancy, "Do you play chess?"

The Captain rose, his manner relieved. "I play chess, though rather badly. Come, we shall have a try at a game in my quarters."

"THE men are isolated, in here," said the Captain, almost in a whisper. He threw open the door of a small shed, and pushed the chemist in ahead of him.

"And your doctor?" asked the chemist.

"Out of the way for the evening," said the Captain.

They stood beside two men on common barracks cots, the Captain a little behind the chemist, as if reluctant to come too close. The sick men lay as if in a stupor, breathing dully.

"How long have they lain this way, Captain?"

"For days, especially the first one. We thought first he had been drinking too much. He beat his head and cried out with pain, and he vomited a good deal. Then he fell into this stupor. The other the same way."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, I guess so. We didn't worry until it seemed that they didn't rouse."

The chemist pondered, gazing at the two men. "Is this the one who fell ill first?"

"Yes." The Captain looked at him suddenly. "How could you know?"

"I didn't," said the chemist, hesitating a little. "I merely guessed. He looked more wasted, and his face was more stupid."

He reached down and shook the man. The Captain withdrew imperceptibly, watching closely. There was no response, except for a faint lifting of the heavy eyelids over the glazed eyes.

"Can you hear me?" said the chemist loudly. "Come, wake up. How do you feel?"

There was no further response from the dull, mask-like face. The chemist let him drop back, and

turned to the other man.

"Come," he said. "Wake up! Can you hear me? How do you feel? Speak up, man!"

The man muttered something, lifting heavy lids. "Oh, my head," he groaned. The chemist took the flashlight from the Captain and held it before the man's eyes.

"Come, speak up!" he said, again. "What do you see?" The man groaned. "Come, speak up! What do you see?"

"Oh-oh. Some lights. Don't bother me. Leave me alone."

"Lights! How many lights?" The chemist held the flashlight farther back, and moved it slowly back and forth.

"Two—no, one—no, two lights. I don't know. Oh, don't bother me."

The chemist let him fall back into his stupor, and stood looking at him, hauling forth his handkerchief to blow into it noisily. The Captain moved restlessly.

"Come, must we remain here longer?" The chemist followed him out.

"Well," said the Captain, when they were in his quarters. "Can't you say something? What is it—can you tell anything?"

The chemist sat down thoughtfully. "My Captain," he began, slowly, "I told you that I was no doctor. I would hazard a guess that it is not—some plague. But we can only await further developments."

"Wait! What further developments can there be? You are as bad as the old doctor, muttering about not being sure—something he doesn't understand."

"Ah, the old doctor. Didn't he say anything more?"

"Almost nothing. Some mutterings about brain fever, I think."

"Brain fever. Yes, it might be, I suppose. Head pains, stupor, face like a mask, seeing double. It might be so. But you should trust a doctor to know more than a mere chemist."

"I know—you are not a doctor. But is this—contagious? Will it spread further?"

"How can I say? I am not well informed. I do not think the cause is well known for brain fevers. Contagious? Probably not on any large scale. But I can only say that we must wait. If it appears in this company only, or nearby, then we might have some evidence. If it does not reappear here, that would be something else again. But I don't know much about all this, my Captain."

"The man looked stupid, idiotic. Does that mean anything?"

"It is not uncommon, I believe, in certain brain fevers."

"Will they recover, then?"

"How can I say? I do not know."

The Captain rose brusquely. "I have trespassed on your time, Mr. Chemist," he said, formally. "You have relieved my mind a little, though not finally. I sup-

pose we must wait, as you say. In the meantime—may I hope that you will continue your interest—in chess—at a not too distant date?"

Before the chemist could answer, a discreet knock was heard at the door. The Captain opened a desk drawer and took from it a chessboard, pawns and counters in position. As he placed it on the desk, the chemist could barely repress a smile. But the Captain said loudly, "Who is it?"

A muffled voice answered, "Sergeant Vorm."

The Captain glanced at the chemist, then roared, "Come in!" Sergeant Vorm entered and saluted, "Our State!" He did not look at the chemist.

"Our State!" said the Captain briefly. "What do you want?"

"If the Captain will permit—some news of importance to our company."

"All right. Speak up. I vouch for this man."

"It is this. Two further sick men have been reported, almost the same, in army Company J across the city."

The Captain jumped up, and the chemist started, nervously blowing his nose. "On the other side of the city!" said the Captain. "What does this mean, Mr. Chemist? Sergeant, are you sure?"

"Quite sure, my Captain."

"Has any one in our company had any contact with Company J? This is important, sergeant."

"To the best of our knowledge, no. I have inquired, my Captain."

"Mr. Chemist, what do you think now? This changes things. You cannot refuse me now. I insist."

"This does indeed reach beyond us, my Captain," said the chemist. "And I should like to follow its outcome, as a citizen at least. But—will you not need now to obtain authority from—outside?"

"I suppose so. Yes, I suppose so. It has gone beyond us. Sergeant, continue your investigations. But mind, not a word to anyone."

After the sergeant had gone, the Captain strode back and forth a few times. "Mr. Chemist," he said finally, almost pleadingly, "what do you say now? Does this change your diagnosis?"

"I have made no real diagnosis, Captain, you will remember. But this does point to some source of infection outside of this company. But I am helpless. I am too uninformed."

"But you must suggest something! In secrecy for the time being, of course."

"If—if, my Captain, you wish help—there were certain books, perhaps—if one had access to them."

"Books? What books? What should I know of books?"

"I am sorry, Captain. I thought only to mention them."

"But what books? What do you

mean? Is not the library of the Bureau at your disposal?"

"Yes—a library on chemical warfare. But no medical books. I thought merely—certain books might have survived the destruction of the Institute—."

"The Institute!" said the Captain, flushing. "How should I—you presume on your status, Mr. Chemist!"

"Quite right, my Captain. I ask your pardon."

"But—." The Captain halted him. "We must consider this matter. It may become grave. You will see my men again?"

"Well, yes—but no diagnosis. You must ask your own doctor."

"You would do well not to be stubborn—now," said the Captain, coldly. "This will be in higher hands all too soon."

"We shall perhaps all do well not to be too stubborn—now," said the chemist, softly, as if to himself.

The Captain looked soberly at him, then moved abruptly to the door. "This way, my dear chemist. I shall provide a guard to your rooms. We must meet again—for a game, perhaps?"

"As you wish," said the chemist.

WHEN next the chemist entered these quarters, he was startled to be greeted by a huge man in a colonel's uniform. The Captain presented him.

"Chief Chemist Manich of the Chemical Bureau," he said stiffly.

"I have heard of you," said the Colonel, in a thick, alcoholic voice. "No doubt you have profited by this time by my permission to glance at certain volumes rescued by our valued Captain from the late unfortunate fire."

The chemist bowed. "I am deeply grateful, my Colonel, for your intervention." His arched nose seemed to jut forward more aggressively than ever, even impudently in its sudden change of course, though his manner was very humble. "The Captain will have told you, of course, that I am no doctor, only a chemist; and, indeed, somewhat surprised to find myself so—so in demand. It was at the Captain's request."

The Captain appeared not to relish these references to him. But the Colonel ignored him.

"I understand, Mr. Chemist. We appreciate your aid. What have you concluded. This becomes important to us, you know, with two or three new cases."

"Indeed! And may I ask the Colonel where?"

"Two in a new barracks on the south side of the city, and one in the suburb of Lake Blauen."

"Lake Blauen!" The chemist seemed surprised. "That—that is remote."

"Does it surprise you?" The Colonel was brusque.

"In a way, yes. At least, this is outside of the army?"

"No, it is not. We have, it happens, a—camp for the too unfriendly out there. But it is outside the city proper. And your conclusions?"

"I shall summarize briefly. No new cases have appeared in this company for the past three weeks. Let us assume that the period of incubation is past in this localized area for immediate infection."

The Captain sighed faintly. But the Colonel said only, "Will you state briefly what is known of this disease."

"Very little is known by me, unfortunately, my Colonel. I do not even hazard a name for it with certainty. I have no real training in hospitals or medical laboratories—"

"Yes, we know that," interrupted the Colonel.

"But I am assuming for the moment, from my scant reading, that it fits best a disease known as Encephalitis—Encephalitis Lethargica, to be ponderous. Unfortunately, little is known of this disease, even by the—former experts. Its virus had not even been isolated, and the treatment is largely guesswork."

"You are not encouraging. And if we get our best doctors here from the Capitol—the Leader's own corps?"

"That might be desirable. But without time and laboratory study—well, results might still be negative."

The Colonel stared strangely at the chemist for a moment. "You appear to me, Mr. Chemist," he said coldly, "to suggest some criticism of our Leader's staff."

"Your pardon, my Colonel," the chemist hastened to say. "I did not so intend. I am but a chemist, and speak from habit in terms of the disciplines of the laboratory."

The Colonel closed his lips very tightly. The chemist blew his nose, his face otherwise expressionless. Finally, the Colonel barked impatiently,

"Well, have you nothing more to report?"

At that moment, a knock sounded on the door and an envelope was thrust under it. The Captain seized it nervously and passed it to the Colonel. He read it swiftly, passed it to the Captain, who handed it in turn to the chemist. The three men eyed one another silently for a moment. The Colonel breathed heavily.

"This is *bad!*" he said in a low voice. "The Captain of Company J! This *is* bad! Have you anything to say now, Mr. Chemist?"

"I do not know—what to say. It appears that our success is in the balance."

"It appears," said the Colonel in a loud, husky voice, "that even our officers are not to remain immune. Does that not fit in with your observations, my dear chemist?"

He glared fiercely at Manich, who replied haltingly,

"I am afraid I cannot deny the Colonel's deductions. This becomes more serious, as you say. I take it that this calls for—expanded investigations. I can only ask to be relieved from such responsibility, my Colonel."

"Relieved! And why so?"

"I am in a delicate position, my Colonel. I have had no higher authority to step into this unfamiliar area. If I am of assistance, and that is discovered, who authorizes me to interfere? If I am of no help, how much greater my crime for bungling where I have no business to be. You two alone—perhaps the sergeant also—know of my interest in this matter. You will appreciate, my Colonel—"

"It will be attended to," roared the Colonel. "Enough of this!"

. The chemist drew forth his huge handkerchief nervously.

"Why, may I ask," shouted the Colonel irritably, "must you be forever blowing on that—that confounded crooked trumpet of yours?"

The chemist was embarrassed, and quickly replaced his handkerchief. "I am sorry, my Colonel. An—an accident to my nose, some time ago—not aided by the chemical fumes in which I work."

"And you have nothing better to suggest than that you withdraw from something in which you are now deeply involved?"

"I fear not. It was not my wish to be involved. But the old doctor you spoke of, my Captain. Is he available?"

"The doctor is no longer here," answered the Colonel for the Captain. "He was—uncooperative." He looked meaningfully at the chemist.

The chemist bowed. "It is not for me to suggest. But a consultation with a man so intimately connected with the first appearance of this malady—"

"Have you anything else to suggest?"

"Well—a complete history of every man affected, his age, his food, his habits, his health record, his environment and contacts within his area."

"That is much better. And does that not include contacts outside of his area as well, my dear chemist?"

"Quite right," said the chemist, starting to reach for his pocket, but thinking better of it.

There was a silence. The Colonel appeared to be weighing some decision. Then he spoke in military fashion.

"Captain, you will set about obtaining this information, with authority from the Council, which will be forthcoming tomorrow. Mr. Chemist, you will without doubt be summoned to appear before the Council within a few days, with a report on what you know of this matter to date. The old doctor will probably be there also—under

guard, of course. The matter has gone beyond us."

He turned on the Captain. "Captain, you will also appear. Mind you, I make no charge of negligence. But you will be held accountable for immediate reports in the future. Our State!"

"Our State!" the other two saluted.

WHEN Chemist Manich had concluded his report before the Council, including his version of his unwilling participation in the role of medical adviser, there was a prolonged silence, during which the chemist was distinctly aware of a row of unfriendly, and in some cases, malevolent faces. The most malevolent belonged to Councellor Dunkelt. Sturdy of shoulders, red of face, he seemed to cherish some special hostility toward the chemist. When the President of the Council finally broke the silence to ask,

"Has anyone a question to put?" it was Dunkelt who spoke.

"Mr. Chemist Manich—or should I say, Mr. Interne Doctor?—were you not at one time a student at the old Institute?"

The chemist frowned slightly. "You know quite well that I was, Councellor Dunkelt. I have made no effort to conceal the—episode."

The Councellor flushed an angry red. "So! And what episode do you refer to now?"

"I have only to say that I was a first year student at the Institute, and that only for a few months, after which I stepped into the service of the state as a chemist in chemical warfare. There is nothing further in the matter."

The Councellor relaxed somewhat, but glared darkly at the chemist. The President leaned forward and asked softly,

"Did you, at that time, study under the once famed Dr. Rosen, specialist in brain diseases?"

"Mr. President," answered the chemist coolly but respectfully, "your highly competent Information will have told you that I was but a beginning student and so not eligible to study under Dr. Rosen; but that I did, indeed, have such an aim in mind for the future. I do not think Dr. Rosen would remember—would have remembered me, much less thought of me as one of his students."

"But you were held to have promise in your studies?"

"That I do not know, Councellor President. I should not have been averse at that time to the reputation."

"Thank you, Chemist Manich. You make it easier by your frankness for us to work together. It is fortunate, however unwilling you may have been, that our Colonel sought out your services. One further question. Since your departure from the Institute, have you continued your medical studies?"

"Naturally not, President Councellor. I have had no access to medical literature of laboratories since that date."

"Except—?"

"Except, of course, for what the Colonel kindly put at my disposal in the last week or two."

"Another question. In your opinion, could the—destruction of the old Institute have released any dangerous—ah, germs upon our city—such as might have precipitated this strange malady?"

The chemist pondered. "Within my limited knowledge, I should say not. My reason is that too great a time has elapsed since that—incident. The germs you hypothecate would not have survived without special treatment."

"You relieve the minds of several. Could it be—might we hypothecate, shall we say, some former doctor, or even some employe, who might have secreted such destructive germs for later release?"

The chemist was visibly under a strain. Councellor Dunkelt listened closely. "Your question offers room for speculation, Mr. President. But again I would say, no. You see, germs of this sort must have a carefully controlled temperature and a special laboratory environment—such as is not now available in this city."

"Thank you, Mr. Chemist. You will be seated next to Councellor Dunkelt."

"At the Council table?" asked Manich, in surprise.

"At the table. There is a reason. Next! Bring in Dr. Rosen."

The chemist halted midway to his seat, not unobserved by the President and Dunkelt. But he continued quietly, and watched the next scene with closest attention, as if he were trying to solve some confusing puzzle.

A small, wizened man with a shock of gray hair, a man enfeebled by something more than the passage of time, stood patiently before the President. He made no effort of salute, not did his Semitic features show any special deference.

"Dr. Rosen," said the President sharply, "will you first look at our Council table, and say if you recognize any man here as previously known to you."

Dr. Rosen raised enfeebled eyes, and, amid a silence, his gaze went slowly down the line of faces. At Councellor Dunkelt, his eyes steadied.

"Well?" said the President.

"Yes. I should know that man. (Dunkelt shrank back). His name—yes, it was Dunkelt."

"Indeed! And why should you remember Councellor Dunkelt?"

Dunkelt started to protest, but the President warned him with a gesture. Next to him, Chemist Manich blew his nose loudly, looking directly at Dunkelt. The old doctor continued, in his feeble voice,

"He was a janitor at the Insti-

tute. He was dismissed."

"Indeed! And for what?"

"For tampering with our laboratory equipment—yes, that was it."

"Is that all you have to say, Dr. Rosen, about this man?" The President was restless.

Dr. Rosen drew his thin shoulders up slightly. "No, not all. That man led in the barbarous looting of the Insti—."

"You forget, Dr. Rosen, where you are! I suggest that you watch your language."

"I have no reason to alter my language in this case, Mr. President," said the doctor, tremulously.

The President stared at him. "You might be persuaded to regret such words, my dear doctor," he said softly, his voice like a thin blade.

The doctor's frail shoulders bowed slightly, but he said nothing.

"Continue your scrutiny, doctor," said the President, coldly. The doctor gave a brief glance at the remaining faces.

"There is no one else," he said.

"But there is someone who recognizes you," said the President. "Look."

The doctor looked once again, and shook his head. "No. No one. There were many once who would have recognized me," he added, simply.

"Chemist Manich," said the President, sharply. "Rise. Do you recognize Dr. Rosen?"

"I should not have known him without your introduction," said the chemist, a little shakily. "But I know him to be Dr. Rosen. Yes."

"You did not know, then, that he attended the first two men who fell ill, in the company of Captain Brenn?"

The chemist started. "I did not indeed. It never occurred to me—I did not know that Dr. Rosen was still—living."

"Dr. Rosen," said the President. "Do you now recognize Chemist Manich as a former student at the Institute, and as the man who was consulted by Captain Brenn concerning your patients in his company?"

Dr. Rosen seemed to awake, and looked keenly at Manich. "No," he said, finally, "I never saw this man, to my knowledge. Should I know you, Chemist Manich?"

"Probably not, Dr. Rosen," said Manich, gently. "I was but an entering student, and that for a few months only, for I left to enter the service of the State as a chemist."

"I do not remember well these days, my boy. I am sorry."

"Enough!" said the President. "Now as to this epidemic. It will need the closest attention. Already valuable men have been rendered useless to us. Though none has died, none has returned to usefulness. Dr. Rosen, do you consent to hold yourself in readi-

ness to assist in their cure?"

"I am a doctor," said Rosen, simply. "It is my work to treat disease wherever and whenever I find it, without question of party or person."

"Very well. You will have your orders. And you, Chemist Manich?"

"I am at the service of the State, as my limited knowledge will permit."

The old doctor looked keenly at Manich again. The President continued,

"You must know that our Leader has personally authorized our employment of such persons as we see fit to stamp out this epidemic. Indeed, it is expected that he may visit our city himself in the not too distant future."

The chemist was plainly interested in this news. His handkerchief came forth again, and his hand trembled slightly. The President hesitated, then said sharply,

"These men are to have such aid as they need. Council is dismissed!"

WHEN next Manich saw the President, it was a private reception in a vast chamber, and he was seated at such a distance from the President's massive desk that he had almost to shout to be heard.

For several days now the city of Blauenberg had been in a furore of preparation for the Leader's expected visit—a preparation consisting most notably of the blocking off of certain streets, elaborate decoration of buildings, the prolonged drilling of troops, the brutal clubbing of individuals in certain parts of the city, and the erection of a great stadium.

The President said nothing of all this, however. "Chemist Manich," he began, "have you been satisfied with the reports furnished you?"

"I can only marvel, Mr. President, at their thoroughness. They are distinctly helpful to me."

"Our Information is efficient, Mr. Chemist. But have you made any progress?"

"I have assembled certain materials. But I am puzzled by one or two items. There is, for instance, the scattering of cases, the apparent lack of any common ground. The cases are not concentrated, almost not related, for a city so large as ours."

"And the other item?"

"Yes. I hesitate—but, to date, no record has been given me of the Captain of Company J."

"And how did you come to know of the illness of the Captain of Company J?" The President fixed him with a stony glare.

But the chemist was not perturbed. "It was reported to the Colonel in my presence," he said.

"Ah, yes. I had forgot the Colonel. Were there further cases in Captain Brenn's company?"

"None that I have heard of."

"There is another item, not yet

mentioned by you, that all known cases have occurred in the armed forces of our State."

"True. Also of interest. I had not forgotten it, Mr. President."

"And you have no theory?"

"I leave that willingly to better informed men, Mr. President."

"Have you any request for further aid in your researches?"

"There is one slight matter, Mr. President, if I may remark—I am aware that I am followed constantly, and that my rooms were ransacked in my absence. This apparent suspicion, dare I say, does not put one at complete ease."

"A mere formality, my dear chemist," said the President, with a forced smile. "Nothing for a servant of the State to worry over. Rest assured that our Leader will not be unmindful of your part in this emergency."

There was a pause. The chemist rose to leave. "In due time," said the President, "we shall know more. I can only say that even now the Leader's special corps of chemists and doctors is on its way to our city." He picked up some papers on his desk, and did not look up as the chemist withdrew, blowing his nose softly.

THE chemist was not wholly unprepared, then, when he was summoned with considerable ceremony to appear before a gathering of the mighty. Dr. Rosen he had not seen in the interim, and he had not ventured to ask about him. But Dr. Rosen was also present at this new gathering. He roused himself to fix the chemist for a moment with a keen glance; but he looked more closely at the Leader's doctors who sat importantly at a large table at one side. To Manich, the old doctor's eyes were enigmatic, shaded, yet piercing.

If Chemist Manich had ever doubted the thoroughness of the Leader's inner circle, he no longer did so. Questioning was minute and relentless. Yet more than once he sensed behind the questions a complete documentation that made a mystery of questions without apparent aim, or whose aim was known only to shrewd minds that had digested much material. He and the old doctor seemed as much under examination as did the malady itself.

"Chemist Manich," said one of the doctors on the Commission, "in your opinion, what is the most baffling aspect of this epidemic?"

Manich weighed his words carefully. "In my opinion, Mr. Commissioner, the problem is puzzling because of the widely scattered area of incidence, among men who have apparently no contact with each other; and, at the same time, there is the limited character of this epidemic, in that it seems not to have appeared outside of our own local-

ity."

"You have stated it excellently. A doctor could not have done better." Dr. Rosen lifted his eyes to look at Manich speculatively. "But you omit something."

"Yes?"

"Have you not observed that this malady hits only male members of our armed forces?"

"I have, indeed, Mr. Commissioner."

"Have you any comment on these facts?"

"To date, Mr. Commissioner, any definitive comment eludes me. I am, you understand, not trained in this work."

"We know. For that reason, we asked you to correlate factual findings. One further observation may have eluded your analysis. Departing for a moment from the areas involved, let us look at the men themselves. Curiously significant, it seems to us, is the fact that each was a valued member of his company; and each was of a certain physical, and even shall we say, a certain mental type. Had this fact struck you?"

"Only vaguely, Mr. Commissioner, I fear. Yet I think I had begun to note it in some degree."

"Hmm. In what part of the city have you lived?"

"I have confined myself to the region of the Bureau of Chemical Munitions, and my rooms nearby, as is known to the Council."

"True. You have eaten frequently at the Cafe Bretna, and have visited the quarters, on occasion, of Captain Brenn."

"Yes, Mr. Commissioner. The latter but three times."

"Previous to this emergency, your movements are not so completely substantiated. You were, it seems, quite a roamer over this city."

"I am a native of this city, Mr. Commissioner, and have a deep affection for it. I know it well."

"Enough for the moment. Dr. Rosen, come forward."

Dr. Rosen came with feeble steps before the elevated seats of his questioners, and stood there patiently.

"Dr. Rosen, your history is well known to us, and it is not necessary to repeat it here. What is your diagnosis of this malady?"

"My tentative diagnosis is Encephalitis Lethargica."

"And why tentative?"

"Because there are certain puzzling aspects involved."

"Dr. Rosen," interrupted the Commissioner, "will you not save our time by giving us in brief your observations and conclusions. Thank you." Several doctors at the table began to take notes. After all, Dr. Rosen was still—Dr. Rosen.

"Gladly," said the old doctor. "Might I—may I sit down. I am not very strong." A chair was brought for him.

"The symptoms," he began, "are the usual—violent head pains,

often vomiting, then increasing lethargy, and the mask-like facial expression."

"Yes? Thus far, your diagnosis agrees with that of our staff. What is there irregular?"

The old doctor cast a glance of doubtful meaning at the doctors scribbling. He spoke slowly and quietly, but no one missed his words,

"None recover."

There was a distinct stir among the examiners. Manich, too, leaned forward.

"But, Dr. Rosen," said one who had not spoken, "is it not too soon to say that? After all, none has died yet."

"I may have spoken somewhat prematurely, your excellencies," said the old man, his voice quavering a bit. "None has died, it is true; and even that is somewhat irregular. And some have even recovered bodily health. But none has shown any signs of recovering mental health."

There was a breathless silence. It was, for a moment, as if the wasted frame of the old man dominated the whole room. Then the chief examiner asked, as if with an effort,

"And your conclusion?"

"That all afflicted with this disease have at best the chance of living out their natural lives as hopeless idiots."

"But, Dr. Rosen, surely—surely, you can not be so certain. Have you no remedies to suggest?"

The old doctor sketched with his hands a faintly Semitic gesture of helplessness. "So far, I have no reason to think I am wrong. And I have no treatment, beyond the usual ineffective treatment for Encephalitis."

Another silence succeeded this statement. Then a visitor leaned forward, and said with icy clarity, "Could it be, Dr. Rosen, that you take any satisfaction in this unfortunate result?"

The old doctor raised his head and looked directly at the questioner. "I am a doctor, and have taken the oath of Hippocrates," he said.

"And you did not know, perchance, that Councellor Dunkelt has this week become a victim of this strange malady?"

"I did not, indeed, Mr. Commissioner. I can only express surprise and—sorrow."

"Chemist Manich," the Commissioner turned abruptly. "Did you know of this recent case?"

The chemist rose quickly. "No, I—I did not know of it, Commissioner."

The whole bench of examiners eyed the two for some silent moments, as if uneasy, as if in the presence of some obscure threat to them all, as if these two had concealed from them some dread secret. Perhaps, they seemed to be thinking, perhaps it was a mistake to investigate this doomed city in person. Chemist Manich

mopped his brow with his handkerchief, and blew into it softly. Dr. Rosen alone appeared unmoved The Chief Commissioner finally turned once more to the old doctor.

"Dr. Rosen, as a man of learning, you must be aware that we face a strange and baffling situation. Does not your learning offer any aid?" The Commissioner was respectful.

The old doctor seemed to call his mind to the task with effort. He drew himself up slightly. "At the time of the looting of my Institute, Mr. Commissioner, I was engaged in certain researches upon the mystery of Encephalitis, for which the virus is still unknown—even to the best. (He glanced at the assembled doctors.) Who knows? Had I not been interrupted, I might have had some aid to offer. Now I know as little as—as your doctors."

"What was the nature of your researches?" the Commissioner asked, ignoring the references to the Leader's corps of specialists.

"They were confined to some experiments with animal subjects, and some special germ cultures. I was seeking the virus and its antidote."

"And had you made any significant progress?"

The old doctor hesitated. "Nothing definitive. I had hoped —but that is past now."

"What had you done with the animals?"

"I had got so far as to inoculate some of them with the disease, but not to cure them. There were no real results—but I had hoped—"

"Then you do not wish to conclude—"

"I can only conclude with you that we are baffled, and that we can but continue the conventional treatments and order strict isolation of all affected persons. Further than that, I know no more than you. The consequences seem beyond clear knowledge or complete control—even yours, gentlemen."

"Dr. Rosen! You speak dangerously!"

"Only truthfully, Mr. Commissioner. I am too old to fear further dangers for myself—only for my country. I have lived at least to see that even the Party recognizes limits to its powers—that the principle of destruction has its limits also."

"Enough! You do not know, perhaps, that our Leader will examine all records of this testimony."

"I am content," said the doctor, simply. "I would not change what I have said."

The room was tense, as if expecting some thunderclap. There was heavy breathing about the table. Chemist Manich blew a blast into his handkerchief. The Commissioner started.

"Chemist Manich," he shouted, "what in the name of Heaven

causes you to blow that—that ram's horn at such inopportune moments?"

"Your pardon, Commissioner," said Manich, humbly, dropping his hand; "an accident—it was broken—I am sorry."

"The Commission will recess until further call," roared the Commissioner. "Chemist Manich will remain in his office at the Bureau until called. Dr. Rosen will be returned to his—quarters on Lake Blauen. Dismissed!"

At the mention of Lake Blauen, the chemist turned toward the old doctor, a look of sudden pity and comprehension in his face; but the old man was tottering away between two guards. Then the chemist felt the Commissioner's eye upon him, and walked quickly to the door, followed by Sergeant Vorm.

THAT afternoon, at three, Chemist Manich, at work among his test tubes, was surprised by the appearance of Sergeant Vorm. The sergeant was very polite, so polite as to put Manich on his guard.

"Chief Chemist Manich," he announced, saluting smartly, "You are invited to accompany me to the Lake for a little excursion on the water, and a breath of fresh air."

"Indeed! And to whom am I indebted for this courtesy?"

"It is the Commissioner's idea. He says he will need your help tonight, and that you will need a clear head."

"So?" The chemist took his hat and followed the sergeant. The sergeant escorted him for several blocks to the lake's edge, where lay a small launch, such as had been formerly patronized by tourists.

"Here we are," said the sergeant. "You are to board this boat. I shall meet you here again at six."

"You are not going with me?"

"No. Instructions are to leave you alone. You will proceed to the small deck at the rear, where you will be molested by no one. There is only the engineer, and he is strictly ordered to stay in his own end of the boat."

Somewhat puzzled, the chemist stepped on board. The boat immediately set out for the open water, as if on its own initiative. No one was in sight. The chemist went to the stern of the small deck and stood watching the receding shore. It was a favorite view with him. Lake Blauen, it was often said, rivalled the best in Switzerland. His native city withdrew slowly into the distance, becoming whiter and purer against a background of deeply wooded hills, and more distant rounded mountains. The bay widened imperceptibly, setting the city in a frame of blue foreground and encircling arms of green. There was no sound but the soft lapping of the waters about the boat.

He turned to look toward the opposite shore, still a dim cloud on the horizon. It was then that he was amazed to observe Dr. Rosen, apparently asleep in a deck chair, his frail figure wrapped in a blanket.

"Dr. Rosen!" he said, half to himself, and took a few swift steps across the tiny deck. The old doctor opened his eyes and smiled wanly.

"I didn't wish to interrupt your pleasure," he murmured.

"But how did you come here?"

"Just as you. Escorted by an overly polite officer. Will you sit by me?"

"Is there no one else here?"

"No one. They told the truth—so far."

"So far?"

"My dear Manich, does it not strike you as curious that we have never met until now? And that we should meet now, for the first time, alone on this beautiful lake, within sight of our beloved city?"

"Ah, I see. You do not encourage one to yield to this peaceful scene."

"What were you thinking as you stood there?" the doctor asked quietly.

"I was thinking," the chemist said, sitting down and gazing at the picturesque shore, "that our country has not really changed. Nature seems no different, in spite of—all."

"Nature is not so easily discouraged as we, my boy. Nor do the laws of her workings change to suit man's — whims." The chemist was only half listening. He looked dreamily out over the gentle whitecaps. Only at the next sentence did he turn to look at the doctor. The doctor had continued,

"We must both have been struck in these past few weeks with Nature's strangely impartial course."

The doctor seemed not to notice the change. "Come," he said, "let us talk together, while we have these few peaceful moments. It is true that I do not remember you. Perhaps I should. But that is long ago—it seems to me now. You must have been a promising student. Did you, perhaps, hope to follow me?"

"I did, Dr. Rosen. In the first few months, I read all I could of your work, and dreamed of the day when I might work in your laboratories, under your direction."

"Did you, indeed? And what changed your course?"

"Do you need to ask?"

"No, perhaps not. And—your nose? How was it broken?"

The chemist hesitated. Then he said one word, "Dunkelt."

"Ah—so! Then you were—defending the Institute?"

"Yes. I tried to stop them. And he knew it—when he questioned me before the Council."

"It seems to give you trouble—you blow it frequently."

"Yes. It never healed properly. I trusted no doctor."

The doctor changed the subject abruptly. "Did you ever see Otto—after those days?"

The chemist sat upright. "Ah," said the doctor, softly, "I see that you did. And so—and so, Chemist Manich, you begin to fill out a puzzle for me."

"What do you mean, Dr. Rosen?" The chemist's voice was unsteady. "You—you suspect me of something. What—what shall I say?"

"Say? Why not say the truth? My dear Manich, did you suppose we should be forever unmolested? You underestimate these men who examined us. We must never make the mistake of assuming that malevolence is also always stupid."

"But—we—us?" Manich stammered.

"We," repeated the doctor. "It is I whom they suspected first—and most. But you are now deeply involved."

"I—I do not know what to say," Manich stuttered.

"My dear Manich, you knew both too much and too little. Too much to avoid the keen interest of the Information, too little to conceal forever the nature of your knowledge."

"I—I admit nothing, said Manich, defiantly.

"I'm afraid the game is up, Manich. They are playing with us, like cats with mice. You are not dealing now with dull-witted sergeants. These men are trained in relentless persecution. They want only final proof, and we are supposed to furnish it now."

"Now? What do you mean?"

"I could not let you go unwarned, Manich. There can be only one end. Even if we are wholly innocent, we have come too close now to the inside machinery. This hour of peace upon the lake—it is but a dramatic contrast to the meeting which is planned for tonight. Have you a pencil?"

Bewildered, the chemist handed his pencil to the old man. With an effort, the old doctor poked behind a pipe or two near him, then under a small pile of life-belts next to his chair. "Ah," he said, finally, and drew forth a loop of thin wire, its ends lost to view.

The chemist stared without comprehension at first. Then an exclamation of horror burst from his lips, and he leaped to his feet and tugged with feverish fingers at the straps about the life-belts.

"We are trapped!" he whispered, in a panic.

"My dear boy, where is your scientist's calm?" said the doctor, in a kindly tone. "I assure you, no one is on this boat except for the engineer, who will not molest us. No one hears us here."

"But somewhere—we must do something!"

"Don't you see? If you discov-

er and break that wire, you are convicted of guilty action?"

"But if we leave it—"

"We are convicted. In due time, at any rate. Come, Manich, let us not waste a peaceful hour."

"No! No!" I will not go to their meeting!" Manich shouted, looking wildly about him. "The lake! I'll—

"I know," said the doctor, soothingly. "Yet won't you sit down by me? Don't you see, we can talk freely now. There is nothing further to fear. We are done."

The chemist paced the small deck. "Done? No! Not—yes, you are right. Yes. I must have known all along, deep down, that it would end soon. Yes, of course. I knew it, too."

He sat down, rigid, on the edge of his chair, trying to control his emotion.

"That is better," said the doctor. There was a long silence; then the doctor said reflectively,

"There is a curious peace in truthfulness. It takes away even fear."

Manich roused himself. "Yes—we can talk now. Yes—we can give them an earful!" He pointed at the wire. "If they want a record, I'll give them something to think about! Thirty—forty—of their thugs, idiots forever—yes, officers, and Dunkelt, their prize exhibit in sadism! And more—no one knows yet!"

"You are excited, my boy—and cruel," the doctor said quietly. "Theirs is not all freedom either."

The chemist made a gesture of rejection, but was struck by a thought. "True!" he ejaculated. "They don't know the answer—they never will. They are worried! That's why they keep us so carefully—play with us. They must learn something more certain, or admit defeat. Of course—they don't know what to fear next! It isn't all one-sided!"

"Even power isn't all-powerful. It thinks it is—for a time."

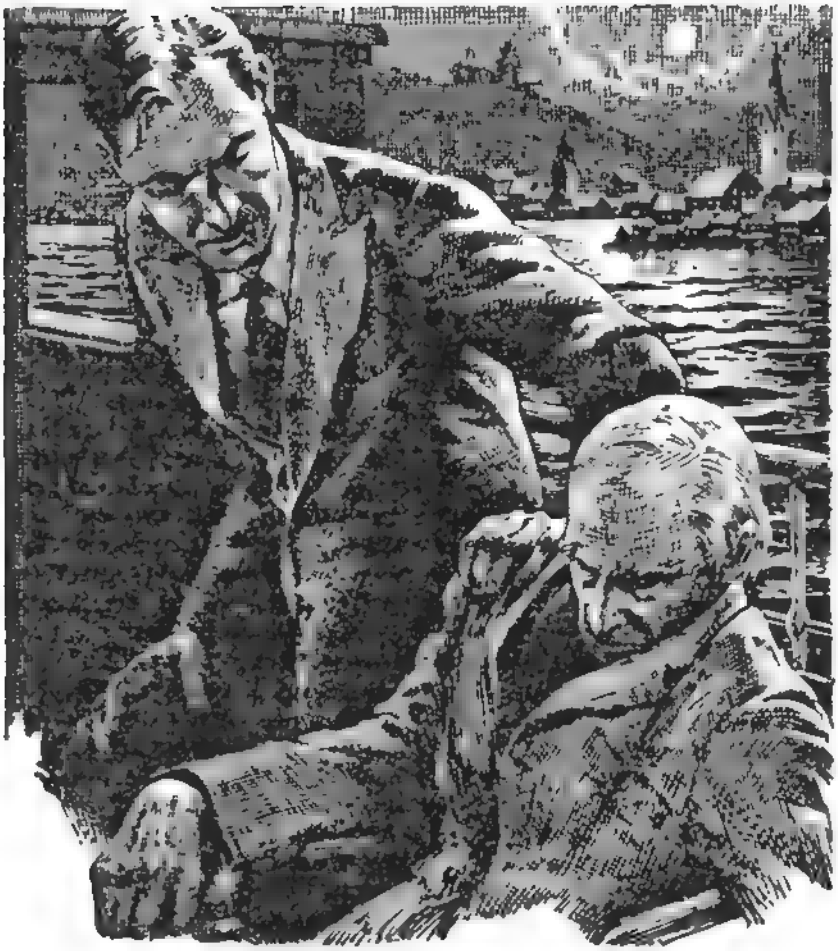
"Yes! I have reached into their inner circles—planted fear where it must not be admitted. And you, doctor—you said we—do they fear you, too? Think of it! The drooling idiots! Our country!" he shouted. "Damn our State! And all its thugs and idiots!"

The doctor closed his eyes wearily, as if in pain. "You too, Manich, are bitten with this mania for power. It is not quite as you think. It is not my way. You are too sure—too sure."

"What do you mean? Have I not destroyed—?"

"Destroyed? Yes. But there may be contagion—human carriers. Innocent people may die because of you, Manich. Had you thought of that?"

The doctor drew a wrinkled hand over his brow, closing his eyes in pain. "And yet," he went on, "I am not guiltless, either. I spoke truthfully when I said that I would give all aid possible to



the infected. But I knew there was something else—something beyond my power. And I kept silent."

"You—you had guessed, then?"

"Some weeks ago, Manich. It struck me that this was, in a way, my disease. I began to be puzzled by certain similarities. I did not tell the Commission, Manich, that when I experimented with my animals, I seemed to have uncovered a variant disease—that all of my animal patients recov-

ered bodily, but all remained lethargic. I was not sure. They did not let me work in my way. But I had to suspect some link sooner or later. And I kept silent."

"But—you are not guilty—why should they torment you?"

"Manich, they understand you. You fight hate with hate. Me they hate because they do not understand. I have a power, of a sort, I suppose; but it does not help them to command it or destroy it. They fear that. It is the power of—knowledge, and patience, and tolerance, and respect for the Nature we live in. It will outlast us—and them."

Manich reflected. "I spared Brenn—he was decent—and, besides, I didn't want to concentrate too obviously. The colonel—I feared him—but I didn't dare—so soon."

"Manich, you frighten me. You are mad."

"Mad? I wonder."

"Tell me, Manich — was it Otto—?"

The chemist began speaking rapidly. "I ran into Otto quite by accident. When I asked after you, he shook his head. I understood that you were dead. He was very crafty. I knew he had some secret."

"Yes."

"I wormed it from him. He had some of your notes, some formulae, some of your pets, as he called them, and some cultures, all kept exactly as you would have done it."

"Poor Otto—a faithful servant—but not too understanding."

"It was remarkable—how, without knowledge, he managed to perform your very tasks." The chemist paused a moment. "At first, I thought only to preserve your memory, your fame. Then I learned that they had—tortured you. I wanted revenge. I didn't guess how—until—"

The doctor's face was distorted with pain, but the chemist did not observe."

"I studied your notes carefully. I was unmolested then—working with dangerous gases for Our State in my own laboratory. How close they were on my heels with their questions! Then Otto disappeared—arrested. I destroyed a lot in panic. But they knew nothing—of that I was sure. I began to dream of a new and powerful weapon. I would experiment. I would follow you."

"It was not my way—not my way."

"I tried to experiment on a few scattered bullies, the sadistic kind. At first nothing happened. I was too timid, I had no records. Do you know, they helped me most when they brought me all those records to study! Strange! There were two here, one there, scattered, no apparent relation. I could not have planned it better. Then I knew I had it!—the secret! I could destroy them one by one! Then you told me—."

"I told you?"

"Yes—that they would remain drooling idiots! What a revenge! It was not murder. It was—justice!"

"Ah, my poor boy, you quibble over terms."

"Do you condemn me then, Dr. Rosen?"

"Condemn? Who can condemn others in this sad world? Some sabotage, wreck trains; some stab in the back or shoot from ambush; you spread disease. Who is patriot, who is murderer? Only —it was never my way. I am not a part of this mad new world. I am a healer first, a patriot later."

"But I selected—only the worst, the irredeemable."

"Even as they select their victims. I am irredeemable to them, unable to consent."

The chemist jumped up suddenly. "Look! The shore!"

The city approached slowly. On the distant bank, like tiny puppets, a squad of soldiers stood, apparently awaiting the coming of the boat.

"It is the end!" The chemist turned to the doctor, his face tense. Then he noticed the wan visage, the frail body, slumped into near collapse.

"Dr. Rosen!" he said. "You are ill!"

"Yes. I have nothing to fear—from them."

"The disease! You have it too!"

The doctor smiled very faintly, feebly, his eyes closed. "Nothing so dramatic, my boy," he whispered. "I am only dying, that is all."

The chemist seized his hands and rubbed them. "Dr. Rosen," he pleaded. The doctor muttered some words.

"Don't wait. I am—beyond them. Do I not—time it well?"

"Dr. Rosen—is this the end?"

The doctor murmured again, "The secret—they do not know?"

"No! Never! I have destroyed everything—they will never know."

The doctor tried to sit up, to say something, "For—the record. Those who sow—destruction, reap —destruction." He half opened his eyes. "Manich—the period of —incubation—two weeks?"

"Yes—yes."

"The virus—can't stand air—bodily temperature?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then how—no, don't tell—them."

"Look!" the chemist whispered. He made swift gestures with his hands—a tiny vial, a sort of blowpipe, a movement to the nostrils, a huge handkerchief covering his hand, a blowing sound.

"Very close up," he whispered. "Carried on the breath, bodily temperature. It didn't always work. Too many risks. Dangerous for me, too. Had to protect myself." The doctor seemed not to listen. "Can you hear me, doctor?"

The master roused himself

with an effort. "Ah, so," he breathed, faintly. "Not the same—but workable." His head dropped. "Not — same — we try — different ways."

The chemist touched his shoulder. There was no response. The shore approached silently, grey after sunset. The chemist stood there for a moment, his crooked nose jutting forth, his head sunk on his chest. There was a faint and distant sound of a voice on the shore. The chemist turned swiftly, and saw a line of men with shouldered guns, who appeared to await some command directed toward the boat. He strode quickly to the rear rail, and looked back.

"Not the same—but workable," he said in a whisper. "I lose—but others will win—because force has only one way."

He let himself quietly over the rail and down to the water's edge. With long strokes he set out for the open lake. There was a sharp command, and the rapid crack of several rifles. Little spurts of water leaped up around the swimmer, until, with a gesture of open hands toward the sky, he sank from sight. Then there was no sound but the lip-lapping of water against the boat, as it glided gently in the gathering dusk toward the dock.

THE END

"Oh well, back to the drawing board."

THE VOICES

By Edward Wellen

Nicholas Kane was sitting at his desk when he heard the voices. This was a departure from the usual, and he heard them only once—but that one time turned out to be once too often for Kane.

Illustrated by Joseph Eberle

WHEN he was fifteen he sat one evening over his homework studiously ignoring it for the moment. With his pencil he drummed a hollow-sounding descending and ascending scale on his cheek by opening and closing his mouth. His elbow, which was resting on the table, suddenly slid. The point of the pencil drove into the center of his left palm and broke off. He pressed a finger on the gash to stem the flow of blood and ran to the bathroom to mercurochrome and bandage the wound. He didn't think to pry out the point and the flesh healed over it. When the scab fell away there was a faint grayish speck visible under the small white scar. Through the years the currents of his body washed the speck along, at the rate of one-billionth of an inch per second.

When he was eighteen he lost an incisor on the football field by tripping and landing on his water bucket. His dentist screwed a tooth of chromium-cobalt alloy into his jawbone. As time went by, further visits to the dentist weighed him down with twenty-three fillings.

When he was twenty-one and working for his Ph. D., ploughing through acres of small print blurred his vision. His optometrist fitted him with a pair of steel-rimmed glasses.

When he was twenty-four he held a good job as a chemical engineer. He loved his work and grudged the time he spent away from it. And so he got into the habit of nibbling a salt-sprinkled tomato for lunch every day. This caused an acid imbalance in his body. It showed in the black-greening of the steel rims of his glasses and of his face where they touched.

When he was twenty-six his glasses fogged and he misread a dial. The explosion that followed ruined his hearing. He began wearing a hearing aid.

When he was twenty-seven he married. It was a double ring ceremony and the bride firmly slipped a gold band over the trembling third finger of his left hand. He had a habit of tapping the ring against his teeth whenever he became lost in thought. It seemed to help him find his way. But his wife said, time after time, "Must you do that?" (It wore on her nerves, like so many other habits of his.) "Are you doing it only to drive me mad?" And she would angrily step up the tempo of her gum-chewing.

When he was thirty—

IT was 10 a.m.

Nicholas Kane, Ph. D., sat at his desk. A problem was facing him and he absently clicked his wedding band against his teeth.

In that second the bit of graphite, which in fifteen years had marched a half inch along his palm toward his fingers, was moving one-billionth of an inch.

Dr. Kane froze. He was beginning to hear voices in his head.

The first was a woman's voice, and even through the metallic distortion Dr. Kane sensed a suggestive sleepiness furring her speech.

"Bill?"

A pause. Then the woman spoke again. She sounded wideawake now. There was anger in her voice, a trace of scorn.

"Put the clock down, you fool."

Her anger suddenly gave way to fear.

"No! Please, please, dear! I promise I'll never see him agai—"

An unpleasant sound of metal striking bone. A long bubbling sigh. Silence.

And then a man saying sickly, "God. What I done?"

And that was all.

During the drama Dr. Kane had overheard, the bit of graphite had moved nine one-billionths of an inch. It was no longer operative.

Dr. Nicholas Kane looked around to see if any of his fellow workers were eyeing him strangely. They were all busy at their own tasks. Relieved, he hid behind a worksheet and frowned in puzzlement.

Curious, he thought, *this business of hearing voices. Am I going psycho? Or were those voices real? Maybe I acted as a radio receiver, picked up a broadcast. It's happened—to a knife-sharpener when crystals of carborundum from his grindstone deposited on the metal fillings in his teeth, and acted like the galena crystals used in the old crystal radio sets. But I haven't sharpened any knives lately. Not* even metaphorically.

He gave it up for the time being, turning back to his work. But the experience had unnerved him too much. He put his papers aside and pleading a headache left for home.

The morning sun and the autumn air proved so buoyant that he was almost in a holiday mood by the time he reached his house. His wife would be surprised. Why not really surprise her by suggesting that they spend the rest of this glorious day picnicking? It was a long time since they had been on an outing. He really should make up to her for neglecting her so much of the time.

He let himself in with his key. The house was quiet. Then he smiled as he heard the dainty snoring of his beloved. He tiptoed into the bedroom. She lay on her back, one hand flung out near her pair of horn-rimmed glasses on the phone table, the other seeming to point at the clock on the dresser. Slowly his presence penetrated her sleep. Without opening her eyes she murmured, "Bill?"

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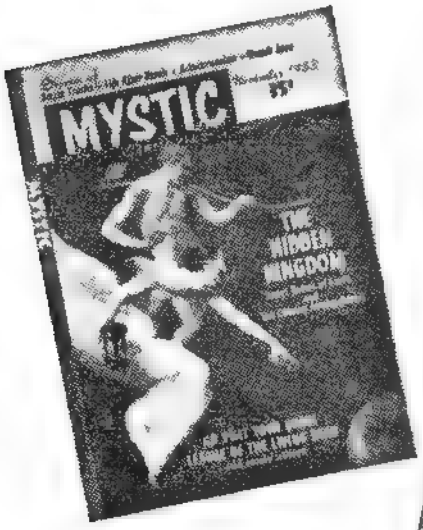

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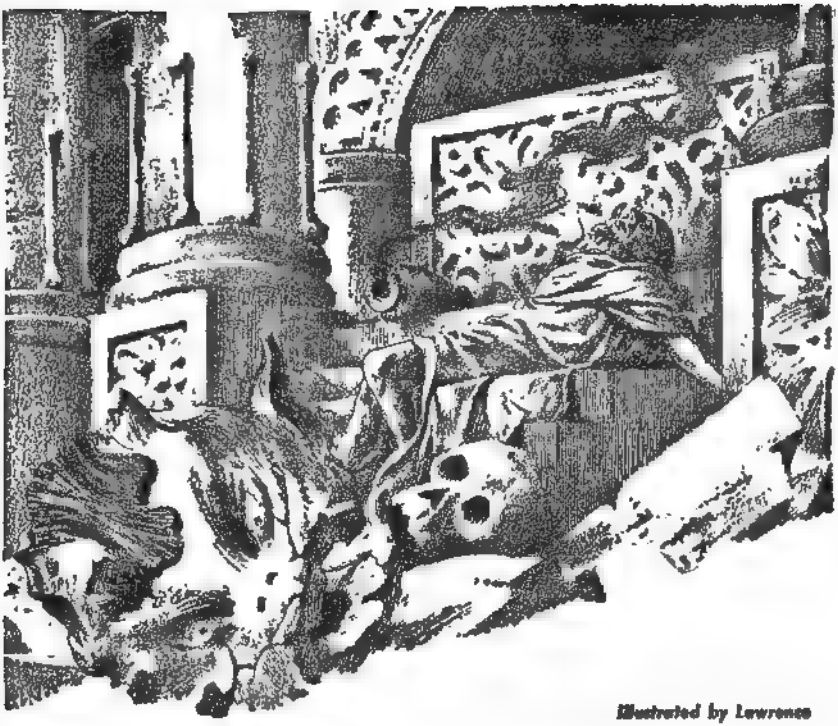


Illustrated by Lawrence

LORD TEDRIC

By Edward E. Smith, Ph. D.

Time is the strangest of all mysteries. Relatively unimportant events, almost unnoticed as they occur, may, in hundreds of years, result in Ultimate Catastrophe. On Time Track Number One, that was the immutable result. But on Time Track Number Two there was one little event that could be used to avert it—the presence of a naked woman in public. So, Skandos One removed the clothing from the Lady Rhoann and after one look, Lord Tedric did the rest!

SKANDOS One (The Skandos of Time Track Number One, numbered for reasons which will become clear) showed, by means of the chronoviagraph, that civilization would destroy itself in one hundred eighty-seven years. To prevent this catastrophe he went back to the key point in time and sought out the key figure—one Tedric, a Lomarrian ironmaster who had lived and died a commoner; unable, ever, to do anything about his fanatical detestation of human sacrifice.

Skandos One taught Tedric how to make one batch of super-steel; watched him forge armor and arms from that highly anachronistic alloy. He watched him do things that Tedric of Time Track One had never done.

Time, then, did *fork. Time Track One was probably no longer in existence. He must have been saved by his "traction" on the reality of Time Track Two. He'd snap back up to his own time and see what the situation was. If he found his assistant Furmin alone in the laboratory, the extremists would have been proved wrong. If not . . .*

Furmin was not alone. Instead, Skandos Two and Furmin Two were at work on a tri-di of Tedric's life: so like, and yet so wildly unlike, the one upon which Skandos One and Furmin One had labored so long!

Shaken and undecided, Skandos One held his machine at the very verge of invisibility and watched and listened.

"But it's so maddeningly incomplete!" Skandos Two snorted. "When it goes into such fine detail on almost everything else, why can't we get how he stumbled onto one lot, and never any other, of high-alloy steel — chrome-nickel-vanadium - molybdenum - tungsten steel — Mortensen's super-steel, to be specific—which wasn't rediscovered for thousands of years?"

"Why, it was revealed to him by his personal god Llosir—don't you remember?" Furmin snickered.

"Poppycock!"

"To us, yes; but not to them. Hence, no detail, and you know why we can't go back and check."

"Of course. We simply don't know enough about time . . . but I would so like to study this Lord of the Marches at first hand! Nowhere else in all reachable time does any other one entity occupy such a uniquely key position!"

"So would I, chief. If we knew just a little *more I'd say go. In the meantime, let's run that tri-di again, to see if we've overlooked any little thing!"*

In the three-dimensional, full-color projection Armsmaster Lord Tedric destroyed the principal images of the monstrous god Sarpedion and killed Sarpedion's priests. He rescued Lady Rhoann, King Phagon's eldest daughter, from the sacrificial altar. The king made him Lord of the Marches, the Highest of the High.

"This part I like." Furmin pressed a stud; the projector stopped. A blood-smeared armored giant and a blood-smeared naked woman stood, arms around each other, beside a blood-smeared altar of green stone. "Talk about being STACKED! If I hadn't checked the data myself I'd swear you went overboard there, chief."

"Exact likenesses — life size," Skandos Two grunted. "Tedric: six-four, two-thirty, muscled just like that. Rhoann: six feet and half an inch, one-ninety. The only time she ever appeared in the raw in public, I guess, but she didn't turn a hair."

"What a couple!" Furmin stared enviously. "We don't have people like that any more."

"Fortunately, no. He could split a full-armored man in two with a sword; she could strangle a tiger bare-handed. So what? All the brains of the whole damned tribe, boiled down into one, wouldn't equip a half-wit.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Furmin objected. "Phagon was a smooth, shrewd operator."

"In a way — sometimes — but committing suicide by wearing gold armor instead of high-alloy steel doesn't show much brainpower."

"I'm not sure I'll buy that, either. There were terrific pressures . . . but say Phagon had worn steel, that day at Middlemarch Castle, and lived ten or fifteen years longer? My guess is that Tedric would have changed the map of the world. He wasn't stupid, you know; just bull-headed, and Phagon could handle him. He would have pounded a lot of sense into his skull, if he had lived."

"However, he didn't live," Skandos returned dryly, "and so every decision Tedric ever made was wrong. But to get back to the point, did you see anything new?"

"Not a thing."

"Neither did I. So go and see how eight twelve is doing."

For Time Test Number Eight Hundred Eleven had failed; and there was little ground for hope that Number Eight Hundred Twelve would be any more productive.

And the lurking Skandos One who had been studying intensively every aspect of the situation, began to act. It was crystal clear that Time Track Two could hold only one Skandos. One of them would have to vanish — completely, immediately, and permanently. Although in no sense a killer, by instinct or training, only one course of action was possible if his own life—and, as a matter of fact, all civilization—were to be conserved. Wherefore he synchronized, and shot his unsuspecting double neatly through the head. The living Skandos changed places with the dead. A timer buzzed briefly. The time-machine disappeared; completely out of synchronization with any continuum that a world's keenest brain and an ultra-fast calculator could compute.

This would of course make another fork in time, but that fact did not bother Skandos One at all—now. As for Tedric; since the big, dumb lug couldn't be made to believe that he, Skandos One, was other than a god, he'd be a god—in spades!

He'd build an image of flesh-like plastic exactly like the copper statue Tedric had made, and go back and announce himself publicly as the god Llosir. He'd come back — along Time-Track Three, of course — and do away with Skandos Three. There might have to be another interference, too, to get Tedric started along the right time-track. He could tell better after seeing what Time-Track Three looked like. If so, it would necessitate the displacement of Skandos Four.

So what? He had never had any qualms; and, now that he had done it once, he had no doubt whatever as to his ability to do it twice more.

OF the three standing beside Sarpedion's grisly altar, King Phagon was the first to become conscious of the fact that something should be done about his daughter's nudity.

"Flasnir, your cloak!" he ordered sharply; and the Lady Rhoann, unclamping her arms from around Tedric's armored neck and disengaging his steel-clad arm from around her waist, covered herself with the proffered garment. Partially covered, that is; for, since the cloak had come only to mid-thigh on the courtier and since she was a good seven inches taller than he, the coverage might have seemed, to a prudish eye, something less than adequate.

"Chamberlain Schillan—Captain Sciro," the king went on briskly. "Haul me this carrion to the river and dump it in—put men to cleaning this place—'tis not seemly so."

The designated officers began to bawl orders, and Tedric turned to the girl, who was still just about as close to him as she could get; awe, wonder, and relieved shock still plain on her expressive face.

"One thing, Lady Rhoann, I understand not. You seem to know me; act as though I were old, tried friend. 'Tis vast honor, but how? You of course I know; have known and honored since you were a child; but me, a commoner, you know not. Nor, if you did, couldst know who it was neath all this iron?"

"Art wrong, Lord Tedric—nay, not 'Lord' Tedric; henceforth you and I are Tedric and Rhoann merely—I have known you long and well; would recognize you anywhere. The few of the old, true blood stand out head and shoulders above the throng, and you stand out, even among them. Who else could it have been? Who else hath the strength of arm and soul, the inner and the outer courage? No coward I, Tedric, nor ever called so, but on that altar my very bones turned jelly. I could not have

swung weapon against Sarpedion. I tremble yet at the bare thought of what you did; I know not how you could have done it."

"You feared the god, Lady Rhoann, as do so many. I hated him."

"'Tis not enough of explanation. And 'Rhoann' merely, Tedric, remember?"

"Rhoann . . . Thanks, my lady. 'Tis an honor more real than your father's patent of nobility . . . but 'tis not fitting. I feel as much a commoner. . . ."

"Commoner? Bah! I ignored that word once, Tedric, but not twice. You are, and deservedly, the Highest of the High. My father the king has known for long what you are; he should have ennobled you long since. Thank Sarp . . . thank all the gods he had the wit to put it off no longer! 'Tis blood that tells, not empty titles. The Throne can make and unmake nobility at will, but no power whatever can make true-bloods out of mongrels, nor create real *manhood* where none exists!"

Tedric did not know what to say in answer to that passionate outburst, so he changed the subject; effectively, if not deftly. "In speaking of the Marches to your father the king, you mentioned the Sages. What said they?"

"At another time, perhaps." Lady Rhoann was fast recovering her wonted cool poise. "'Tis far too long to go into while I stand here half naked, filthy, and stinking. Let us on with the business in hand; which, for me, is a hot bath and clean clothing."

Rhoann strolled away as unconcernedly as though she were wearing full court regalia, and Tedric turned to the king.

"Thinkst the Lady Trycie is nearby, sire?"

"If I know the jade at all, she is," Phagon snorted. "And not only near. She's seen everything and heard everything; knows more about everything than either of us, or both of us together. Why? Thinkst she'd make a good priestess?"

"The best. Much more so, methinks, than the Lady Rhoann. Younger. More . . . umm . . . more priestess-like, say?"

"Perhaps." Phagon was very evidently skeptical, but looked around the temple, anyway. "Trycie!" he yelled.

"Yes, father?" a soft voice answered—right behind them!

The king's second daughter was very like his first in size and shape, but her eyes were a cerulean blue and her hair, as long and as thick as Rhoann's own, had the color of ripe wheat.

"Aye, daughter. Wouldst like to be Priestess of Llosir?"

"Oh, yes!" she squealed; but sobered quickly. "On second thought . . . perhaps not . . . no. If sobeit sacrifice is done I intend to marry, some day, and have six or eight children. But . . . perhaps . . . could I take it now, and resign

later, think you?"

"'Twould not be necessary, sire and Lady Trycie," Tedric put in, while Phagon was still thinking the matter over. "Llosir is not at all like Sarpedion. Llosir wants abundance and fertility and happiness, not poverty and sterility and misery. Llosir's priestess marries as she pleases and has as many children as she wants."

"Your priestess I, then, sirs! I go to have cloth-of-gold robes made at once!" The last words came floating back over her shoulder as Trycie raced away.

"Lord Tedric, sir." Unobserved, Sciro had been waiting for a chance to speak to his superior officer.

"Yes, captain?"

"'Tis the men . . . the cleaning . . . They . . . We, I mean . . ." Sciro of Old Lomarr would not pass the buck. "The bodies—the priests, you know, and so on—were easy enough; and we did manage to handle most of the pieces of the god. But the . . . the heart, and so on, you know . . . we know not where you want them taken . . . and besides, we fear . . . wilt stand by and ward, Lord Tedric, while I pick them up?"

"'Tis my business, Captain Sciro; mine alone. I crave pardon for not attending to it sooner. Hast a bag?"

"Yea." The highly relieved officer held out a duffle-bag of fine, soft leather.

Tedric took it, strode across to the place where Sarpedion's image had stood, and—not without a few qualms of his own, now that the frenzy of battle had evaporated—picked up Sarpedion's heart, liver, and brain and deposited them, neither too carefully nor too carelessly, in the sack. Then, swinging the burden up over his shoulder—

"I go to fetch the others," he explained to his king. "Then we hold sacrifice to end all human sacrifice."

"Hold, Tedric!" Phagon ordered. "One thing—or two or three, methinks. 'Tis not seemly to conduct a thing so; lacking order and organization and plan. Where dost propose to hold such an affair? Not in your ironworks, surely?"

"Certainly not, sire." Tedric halted, almost in midstride. He hadn't got around yet to thinking about the operation as a whole, but he began to do so then. "And certainly not on this temple or Sarpedion's own. Lord Llosir is clean: all our temples are foul in every stone and timber . . ." He paused. Then, suddenly: "I have it, sire—the amphitheater!"

"The amphitheater? 'Tis well. 'Tis of little enough use, and a shrine will not interfere with what little use it has."

"Wilt give orders to build . . . ?"

"The Lord of the Marches issues his own orders. Hola, Schillan, to me!" the monarch shouted, and the Chamberlain of the Realm came on the run. "Lord Tedric speaks with my voice."

"I hear, sire. Lord Tedric, I

listen."

"Have built, at speed, midway along the front of the amphitheater, on the very edge of the cliff, a table of clean, new-quarried stone; ten feet square and three feet high. On it mount Lord Llosir so firmly that he will stand upright forever against whatever may come of wind or storm."

The chamberlain hurried away. So did Tedric, with his bag of spoils. First to his shop, where his armor was removed and where he scratched himself vigorously and delightfully as it came off. Thence to the Temple of Sarpedion, where he collected the other, somewhat-lesser-hallowed trio of the Great One's vital organs. Then, and belatedly, to home and to bed.

A little later, while the new-made Lord of the Marches was sleeping soundly, the king's messengers rode furiously abroad, spreading the word that ten days hence, at the fourth period after noon, in Lompoar's Amphitheater, Great Sarpedion would be sacrificed to Llosir, Lomarr's new and Ultra-powerful god.

THE city of Lompoar, Lomarr's capital, lying on the south bank of the Lotar some fifty miles inland from the delta, nestled against the rugged breast of the Coast Range. Just outside the town's limit and some hundred's of feet above its principal streets there was a gigantic half-bowl, carved out of the solid rock by an eddy of some bye-gone age.

This was the Amphitheater, and on the very lip of the stupendous cliff descending vertically to the river so far below, Llosir stood proudly on his platform of smooth, clean granite.

"'Tis not enough like a god, methinks." King Phagon, dressed now in cloth-of-gold, eyed the gleaming copper statue very dubiously. "'Tis too much like a man, by far."

"'Tis exactly as I saw him, sire," Tedric replied, firmly. Nor was he, consciously, lying: by this time he believed the lie himself. "Llosir is a man-god, remember, not a beast-god, and 'tis better so. But the time I set is here. With your permission, sire, I begin."

Both men looked around the great bowl. Near by, but not too near, stood the priestess and half a dozen white-clad fifteen-year-old girls; one of whom carried a beaten-gold pitcher full of perfumed oil, another a flaring open lamp wrought of the same material. Slightly to one side were Rhoann —looking, if the truth must be told, as though she did not particularly enjoy her present position on the side-lines—her mother the queen, the rest of the royal family, and ranks of courtiers. And finally, much farther back, at a very respectful distance from their strange new god, arranged in dozens of more or less concentric, roughly hemispherical rows, stood everybody who had had time to get there. More were arriving con-

stantly, of course, but the flood had become a trickle; the narrow way, worming upward from the city along the cliff's stark side, was almost bare of traffic.

"Begin, Lord Tedric," said the king.

Tedric bent over, heaved the heavy iron pan containing the offerings up onto the platform, and turned. "The oil, Priestess Lady Trycie, and the flame."

The acolyte handed the pitcher to Trycie, who handed it to Tedric, who poured its contents over the twin hearts, twin livers, and twin brains. Then the lamp; and as the yard-high flames leaped upward the armored pseudo-priest stepped backward and raised his eyes boldly to the impassive face of the image of his god. Then he spoke—not softly, but in parade-ground tones audible to everyone present.

"Take, Lord Llosir, all the strength and all the power and all the force that Sarpedion ever had. Use them, we beg, for good and not for ill."

He picked up the blazing pan and strode toward the lip of the precipice; high-mounting, smoky flames curling backward around his armored figure. "And now, in token of Sarpedion's utter and complete extinction, I consign these, the last vestiges of his being, to the rushing depths of oblivion." He hurled the pan and its fiercely flaming contents out over the terrific brink.

This act, according to Tedric's plan, was to end the program—but it didn't. Long before the fiery mass struck water his attention was seized by a long, low-pitched, moaning gasp from a multitude of throats; a sound the like of which he had never before even imagined.

He whirled—and saw, shimmering in a cage-like structure of shimmering bars, a form of seeming flesh so exactly like the copper image in every detail of shape that it might well have come from the same mold!

"Lord Llosir — in the *flesh!*" Tedric exclaimed, and went to one knee.

So did the king and his family, and a few of the bravest of the courtiers. Most of the latter, however, and the girl acolytes and the thronging thousands of spectators, threw themselves flat on the hard ground. They threw themselves flat, but they did not look away or close their eyes or cover their faces with their hands. On the contrary, each one stared with all the power of his optic nerves.

The god's mouth opened, his lips moved; and, although no one could hear any sound, everyone felt words resounding throughout the deepest recesses of his being.

"I have taken all the strength, all the power, all the force, all of everything that made Sarpedion what he was," the god began. In part his pseudo-voice was the resonant clang of a brazen bell; in part the diapason harmonies of an impossibly vast organ. "I will use

them for good, not for ill. I am glad, Tedric, that you did not defile my hearth—for this is a hearth, remember, and in no sense an altar—in making this, the first and the *only* sacrifice ever to be made to me. You, Trycie, are the first of my priestesses?"

The girl, shaking visibly, gulped three times before she could speak. "Yea, my—my—Lord Llosir," she managed finally. "Th—that is—if—if I please you, Lord Sir."

"You please me, Trycie of Lomarr. Nor will your duties be onerous; being only to see to it that your maidens keep my hearth clean and my statue bright."

"To you, my Lord—Llo—Llosir, sir, all thanks. Wilt keep . . ." Trycie raised her downcast eyes and stopped short in mid-sentence; her mouth dropping ludicrously open and her eyes becoming two round O's of astonishment. The air above the yawning abyss was as empty as it had ever been; the flesh-and-blood god had disappeared as instantaneously as he had come!

Tedric's heavy voice silenced the murmured wave of excitement sweeping the bowl.

"That is all!" he bellowed. "I did not expect the Lord Llosir to appear in the flesh at this time; I know not when or ever he will deign to appear to us again. But this I know—whether or not he ever so deigns, or when, you all know now that our great Lord Llosir lives. Ist not so?"

"'Tis so! Long live Lord Llosir!" Tumultuous yelling filled the amphitheater.

"'Tis well. In leaving this holy place all will file between me and the shrine. First our king, then the Lady Priestess Trycie and her maids, then the Family, then the Court, then the rest. All men as they pass will raise sword-arms in salute, all women will bow heads. Will be naught of offerings or of tribute or of fractions; Lord Llosir is a *god*, not a huckstering, thieving, murdering trickster. King Phagon, sire, wilt lead?"

Unhelmed now, Tedric stood rigidly at attention before the image of his god. The king did not march straight past him, but stopped short. Taking off his ornate head-piece and lifting his right arm high, he said:

"To you, Lord Llosir, my sincere thanks for what hast done for me, for my family, and for my nation. While 'tis not seemly that Lomarr's king should beg, I ask that you abandon us not."

Then Trycie and her girls. "We engage, Lord Sir," the Lady Priestess said, at a whispered word from Tedric, "to keep your hearth scrupulously clean; your statue shining bright."

Then the queen, followed by the Lady Rhoann—who, although she bowed her head meekly enough, was shooting envious glances at her sister, so far ahead and so evidently the cynosure of so many eyes.

The rest of the Family—the Court—the thronging spectators—

and, last of all, Tedric himself. Helmet tucked under left arm, he raised his brawny right arm high, executed a stiff "left face," and march proudly at the rear of the long procession.

And as the people made their way down the steep and rugged path, as they debouched through the city of Lompoar, as they traversed the highways and byways back to the towns and townlets and farms from which they had come, it was very evident that Llosir had established himself as no other god had ever been established throughout the long history of that world.

Great Llosir had appeared in person. Everyone there had seen him with his own eyes. Everyone there had heard his voice; a voice of a quality impossible for any mortal being, human or otherwise, to produce; a voice heard, not with the ears, which would have been ordinary enough, but by virtue of some hitherto completely unknown and still completely unknowable inner sense or ability evocable only by the god. Everyone there had heard—sensed—him address the Lord Armsmaster and the Lady Priestess by name.

Other gods had appeared personally in the past . . . or had they, really? Nobody had ever seen any of them except their own priests . . . the priests who performed the sacrifices and who fattened on the fractions . . . Llosir, now, wanted neither sacrifices nor fractions; and, powerful although he was, had appeared to and had spoken to everyone alike, of however high or low degree, throughout the whole huge amphitheater.

Everyone! Not to the priestess only; not only to those of the Old Blood; not only to citizens or natives of Lomarr; but to *everyone*—down to mercenaries, chance visitors, and such!

Long live Lord Llosir, our new and plenipotent god!

KING PHAGON and Tedric were standing at a table in the throne-room of the palace-castle, studying a map. It was crudely drawn and sketchy, this map, and full of blank areas and gross errors; but this was not an age of fine cartography.

"Tark, first, is still my thought, sire," Tedric insisted, stubbornly. "'Tis closer, our lines shorter, a victory there would hearten all our people. Too, 'twould be unexpected. Lomarr has never attacked Tark, whereas your royal sire and his sire before him each tried to loose Sarlon's grip and, in failing, but increased the already heavy payments of tribute. Too, in case of something short of victory, hast only the one pass and the Great Gorge of the Lotar to hold 'gainst reprisal. 'Tis true such course would leave the Marches unheld, but no more so than they have been for four years or more."

"Nay. *Think*, man!" Phagon snorted, testily. "'Twould fail. Four

parts of our army are of Tark—thinkst not their first act would be to turn against us and make common cause with their brethren? Too, we lack strength, they outnumber us two to one. Nay. Sarlon first. Then, perhaps, Tark; but not before then."

"But Sarlon outnumbers us too, sire, especially if you count those barbarian devils of the Devossian steppes. Since Taggad of Sarlon lets them cross his lands to raid the Marches—for a fraction of the loot, no doubt—'tis certain they'll help him against us. Also, sire, your father and your grandfather both died under Sarlonian axes."

"True, but neither of them was a strategist. I am; I have studied this matter for many years. They did the obvious; I shall not. Nor shall Sarlon pay tribute merely; Sarlon must and shall become a province of my kingdom!"

So argument raged, until Phagon got up onto his royal high horse and declared it his royal will that the thing was to be done his way and no other. Whereupon, of course, Tedric submitted with the best grace he could muster and set about the task of helping get the army ready to roll toward the Marches, some three and a half hundreds of miles to the north.

Tedric fumed. Tedric fretted. Tedric swore sulphurously in Lomarrian, Tarkian, Sarlonian, Devossian, and all the other languages he knew. All his noise and fury were, however, of very little avail in speeding up what was an intrinsically slow process.

Between times of cursing and urging and driving, Tedric was wont to prowl the castle and its environs. So doing, one day, he came upon King Phagon and the Lady Rhoann practicing at archery. Lifting his arm in salute to his sovereign and bowing his head politely to the lady, he made to pass on.

"Hola, Tedric!" Rhoann called. "Wouldst speed a flight with us?"

Tedric glanced at the target. Rhoann was beating her father unmercifully—her purple-shafted arrows were all in or near the gold, while his golden ones were scattered far and wide—and she had been twitting him unmercifully about his poor marksmanship. Phagon was in no merry mood; this was very evidently no competition for any outsider—least of all Lomarr's top-ranking armsmaster—to enter.

"Crave pardon, my lady, but other matters press. . . ."

"Your evasions are *so* transparent, my lord; why not tell the truth?" Rhoann did not exactly sneer at the man's obvious embarrassment, but it was very clear that she, too, was in a vicious temper. "Mindst not beating *me* but never the *Throne?* And any armsmaster who threwest not arrows by hand at this range to beat both of us should be stripped of badge?"

Tedric, quite fatuously, leaped at the bait. "Wouldst permit, sire?"

"*No!*" the king roared. "By my

head, by the Throne, by Llosir's liver and heart and brain and guts —NO! 'Twould cost the head of any save you to insult me so— shoot, sir, and shoot your best!" extending his own bow and a full quiver of arrows.

Tedric did not want to use the royal weapon, but at the girl's quick, imperative gesture he smothered his incipient protest and accepted it.

"One sighting shot, sire?" he asked, and drew the heavy bow. Nothing whatever could have forced him to put an arrow nearer the gold than the farthest of the king's; to avoid doing so—without transparently missing the target completely — would take skill, since one golden arrow stood a bare three inches from the edge of the target.

His first arrow grazed the edge of the butt and was an inch low; his second plunged into the padding exactly half way between the king's wildest arrow and the target's rim. Then, so rapidly that it seemed as though there must be at least two arrows in the air at once, arrow crashed on arrow; wood snapping as iron head struck feathered shaft. At end, the rent in the fabric through which all those arrows had torn their way could have been covered by half of one of Rhoann's hands.

"I lose, sire," Tedric said, stiffly, returning bow and empty quiver. "My score is zero."

Phagon, knowing himself in the wrong but unable to bring himself to apologize, did what he considered the next-best thing. "I used to shoot like that," he complained. "Knowst how lost I my skill, Tedric? 'Tis not my age, surely?"

"'Tis not my place to say, sire." Then, with more loyalty than sense —"And I split to the teeth any who dare so insult the Throne."

"What!" the monarch roared. "By my . . ."

"Hold, father!" Rhoann snapped. "A king you—act it!"

Hard blue eyes glared steadily into unyielding eyes of green. Neither the thoroughly angry king nor the equally angry princess would give an inch. She broke the short, bitter silence.

"Say naught, Tedric — he is much too fain to boil in oil or flay alive any who tell him unpleasantnesses, however true. But *me*, father, you boil not, nor flay, nor seek to punish otherwise, or I split this kingdom asunder like a melon. 'Tis time—yea, long past time—that *someone* told you the unadorned truth. Hence, my rascally but well-loved parent, here 'tis. Hast lolled too long on too many too soft cushions, hast emptied too many pots and tankards and flagons, hast bedded too many wenches, to be of much use in armor or with any style of weapon in the passes of the High Umpasseurs."

The flabbergasted and rapidly-deflating king tried to think of some answer to this devastating

blast, but couldn't. He appealed to Tedric. "Wouldst have said such? Surely not!"

"Not I, sire!" Tedric assured him, quite truthfully. "And even if true, 'tis a thing to remedy itself. Before we reach the Marches wilt regain arm and eye."

"Perhaps," the girl put in, her tone still distinctly on the acid side. "If he matches you, Tedric, in lolling and wining and wenching, yes. Otherwise, no. How much wine do *you* drink, each day?"

"One cup, usually—sometimes —at supper."

"On the march? Think carefully, friend."

"Nay—I meant in town. In the field, none, of course."

"Seest, father?"

"What thinkst me, vixen, a spineless cuddlepet? From this minute 'til return here I match your paragon youngblade loll for loll, cup for cup, wench for wench. Ist what you've been niggling at me to say?"

"Aye, father and king, exactly—for as you say, you do." She hugged him so fervently as almost to life him off the ground, kissed him twice, and hurried away.

"A thing I would like to talk to you about, sire," Tedric said quickly, before the king could bring up any of the matters just past. "Armor. There was enough of the god-metal to equip three men fully, and headnecks for their horses. You, sire, and me, and Sciro of your Guard. Break precedent, sire, I beg, and wear me this armor of proof instead of the gold; for what we face promises to be worse than anything you or I have yet seen."

"I fear me 'tis true, but 'tis impossible, nonetheless. Lomarr's king wears gold. He fights in gold; at need he dies in gold."

And that was, Tedric knew, very definitely that. It was senseless, it was idiotic, but it was absolutely true. No king of Lomarr could possibly break that particular precedent. To appear in that spectacularly conspicuous fashion, one flashing golden figure in a sea of dull iron-gray, was part of the king's job. The fact that his father and his grandfather and so on for six generations back had died in golden armor could not sway him, any more than it could have swayed Tedric himself in similar case. But there might be a way out.

"But need it be *solid* gold, sire? Wouldst not an overlay of gold suffice?"

"Yea, Lord Tedric, and 'twould be a welcome thing indeed. I yearn not, nor did my father nor his father, to pit gold 'gainst hard-swung axe; e'en less to hide behind ten ranks of iron while others fight. But simply 'tis not possible. If the gold be thick enough for the rivets to hold, 'tis too heavy to lift. If thin enough to be possible of wearing, the gold flies off in sheets at first blow and the fraud is revealed. Hast ideas? I listen."

"I know not, sire. . . ." Tedric thought for minutes. "I have seen

gold hammered into thin sheets . . . but not thin enough . . . but it might be possible to hammer it thin enough to be overlaid on the god-metal with pitch or gum. Wouldst wear it so, sire?"

"Aye, my Tedric, and gladly: just so the overlay comes not off by handsbreadths under blow of sword or axe."

"Handsbreadths? Nay. Scratches and mars, of course, easily to be overlaid again ere next day's dawn. But handsbreadths? Nay, sire."

"In that case, try; and may Great Llosir guide your hand."

Tedric went forthwith to the castle and got a chunk of raw, massy gold. He took it to his shop and tried to work it into the thin, smooth film he could visualize so clearly.

And tried — and tried — and tried.

And failed — and failed — and failed.

He was still trying—and still failing—three weeks later. Time was running short; the hours that had formerly dragged like days now flew like minutes. His crew had done their futile best to help; Bendon, his foreman, was still standing by. The king was looking on and offering advice. So were Rhoann and Trycie. Sciro and Schillan and other more or less notable persons were also trying to be of use.

Tedric, strained and tense, was pounding carefully at a sheet of his latest production. It was a pitiful thing—lumpy in spots, ragged and rough, with holes where hammer had met anvil through its substance. The smith's left hand twitched at precisely the wrong instant, just as the hammer struck. The flimsy sheet fell into three ragged pieces.

Completely frustrated, Tedric leaped backward, swore fulminantly, and hurled the hammer with all his strength toward the nearest wall. And in that instant there appeared, in the now familiar cage-like structure of shimmering, interlaced bars, the form of flesh that was Llosir the god. High in the air directly over the forge the apparition hung, motionless and silent, and stared.

Everyone except Tedric gave homage to the god, but he merely switched from the viciously corrosive Devossian words he had been using to more parliamentary Lomarrian.

"Ist possible, Lord Sir, for any human being to do anything with this foul, slimy, salvy, perverse, treacherous, and generally-bedamned stuff?"

"It is. Definitely. Not only possible, but fairly easy and fairly simple, if the proper tools, apparatus, and techniques are employed," Llosir's bell-toned-organ pseudo-voice replied. "Ordinarily, in your lifetime, you would come to know nothing of gold leaf — although really *thin* gold leaf is not required here — nor of gold-beater's skins and membranes and how to use

them, nor of the adhesives to be employed and the techniques of employing them. The necessary tools and materials are, or can very shortly be made, available to you; you can now absorb quite readily the required information and knowledge.

"For this business of beating out gold leaf, your hammer and anvil are both completely wrong. Listen carefully and remember. For the first, preliminary thinning down, you take . . ."*

LOMARR'S army set out at dawn. First the wide-ranging scouts: lean, hard, fine-trained runners, stripped to clouts and moccasins and carrying only a light bow and a few arrows apiece. Then the hunters. They, too, scattered widely and went practically naked: but bore the hundred-pound bows and the savagely-tearing arrows of their trade.

Then the Heavy Horse, comparatively few in number, but of the old blood all, led by Tedric and Sciro and surrounding glittering Phagon and his standard-bearers. It took a lot of horse to carry a full-armored knight of the Old Blood, but the horse-farmers of the Middle Marches bred for size and strength and stamina.

Next came century after century of light horse—mounted swordsmen and spearmen and javelineers—followed by even more numerous centuries of foot-slogging infantry.

Last of all came the big-wheeled, creaking wagons: loaded, not only with the usual supplies and equipment of war, but also with thousands of loaves of bread—hard, flat, heavy loaves made from ling, the corn-like grain which was the staple cereal of the region.

"Bread, sire?" Tedric had asked, wonderingly, when Phagon had first broached the idea. Men on the march lived on meat — a straight, unrelieved diet of meat for weeks and months on end—and all too frequently not enough of that to maintain weight and strength. They expected nothing else; an occasional fist-sized chunk of bread was sheerest luxury. "Bread! A whole loaf each man a day?"

"Aye," Phagon had chuckled in reply. "All farmsmen along the way will have ready my fraction of ling, and Schillan will at need buy more. To each man a loaf each day, and all the meat he can eat. 'Tis why we go up the Midvale, where farmsmen all breed savage dogs to guard their fields 'gainst hordes of game. Such feeding will be noised abroad. Canst think of a better device to lure Taggad's ill-fed mercenaries to our standards?"

Tedric couldn't.

There is no need to dwell in detail upon the army's long, slow march. Leaving the city of Lompoar, it moved up the Lotar River, through the spectacularly scenic gorge of the Coast Range, and into

*See Encyclopedia Britannica (plus). E.E.S.

the Middle Valley; that incredibly lush and fertile region which, lying between the Low Umpasseurs on the east and the Coast Range on the west, comprised roughly a third of Lomarr's area. Into and through the straggling hamlet of Bonoy, lying at the junction of the Midvale River with the Lotar. Then straight north, through the timberlands and meadows of the Midvale's west bank.

Game was, as Phagon had said, incredibly plentiful; out-numbering by literally thousands to one both domestic animals and men. Buffalo-like lippita, moose-like rolatoes, pig-like accides—the largest and among the tastiest of Lomarr's game animals — were so abundant that one good hunter could kill in half an hour enough to feed a century for a day. Hence most of the hunters' time was spent in their traveling dryers, preserving meat against a coming day of need.

On, up the bluely placid Lake Midvale, a full day's march long and half that in width. Past the Chain Lakes, strung on the river like beads on a string. Past Lake Ardo, and on toward Lake Middlemarch and the Middlemarch Castle which was to be Tedric's official residence henceforth.

As the main body passed the head of the lake, a couple of scouts brought in a runner bursting with news.

"Thank Sarpedion, sire, I had not to run to Lompoar to reach you!" he cried, dropping to his knees. "Middlemarch Castle is besieged! Hurlo of the Marches is slain!" and he went on to tell a story of onslaught and slaughter.

"And the raiders worn iron," Phagon remarked, when the tale was done. "Sarlonion iron, no doubt?"

"Aye, sire, but how couldst . . ."

"No matter. Take him to the rear. Feed him."

"You *expected* this raid, sire," Tedric said, rather than asked, after scouts and runner had disappeared.

"Aye. 'Twas no raid, but the first skirmish of a war. No fool, Taggad of Sarlon; nor Issian of Devoss, barbarian though he is. They knew what loomed, and struck first. The only surprise was Hurlo's death . . . he had my direct orders not to do battle 'gainst any force, however slight-seeming, but to withdraw forthwith into the castle, which was to be kept stocked to withstand a siege of months . . . this keeps me from boiling him in oil for stupidity, incompetence, and disloyalty."

Phagon frowned in thought, then went on: "Were there forces that appeared not? . . . Surely not — Taggad would not split his forces at all seriously: 'tis but to annoy me . . . or perhaps they are mostly barbarians despite the Sarlonian iron . . . to harry and flee is no doubt their aim, but for Lomarr's good not one of them should escape. Knowst the Upper Midvale, Tedric, above the lake?"

"But little, sire; a few miles only. I was there but once."

"'Tis enough. Take half the Royal Guard and a century of bowmen. Cross the Midvale at the ford three miles above us here. Go up and around the lake. The Upper Midvale is fordable almost anywhere at this season, so stay far enough away from the lake that none see you. Cross it, swing in a wide circle toward the peninsula on which sits Middlemarch Castle, and in three days . . . ?"

"Three days will be ample, sire."

"Three days from tomorrow's dawn, exactly as the top rim of the sun clears the meadow, make your charge out of the covering forest, with your archers spread to pick off all who seek to flee. I will be on this side of the peninsula; between us they'll be ground like ling. None shall get away!"

Phagon's assumptions, however, were slightly in error. When Tedric's riders charged, at the crack of the indicated dawn, they did not tear through a motley horde of half-armored, half-trained barbarians. Instead, they struck two full centuries of Sarlon's heaviest armor! And Phagon the King fared worse. At first sight of that brilliant golden armor a solid column of armored knights formed as though by magic and charged it at full gallop!

Phagon fought, of course; fought as his breed had always fought. At first on horse, with his terrible sword, under the trenchant edge of which knight after knight died. His horse dropped, slaughtered; his sword was knocked away; but, afoot, the war-axe chained to his steel belt by links of super-steel was still his. He swung and swung and swung again; again and again; and with each swing an enemy ceased to live; but sheer weight of metal was too much. Finally, still swinging his murderous weapon, Phagon of Lomarr went flat on the ground.

At the first assault on their king, Tedric with his sword and Sciro with his hammer had gone starkly berserk. Sciro was nearer, but Tedric was faster and stronger and had the better horse.

"Dreegor!" he yelled, thumping his steed's sides with his armored legs and rising high in his stirrups. Nostrils flaring, the mighty beast raged forward and Tedric struck as he had never struck before. Eight times that terrific blade came down, and eight men and eight horses died. Then, suddenly —Tedric never did know how it happened, since Dreegor was later found uninjured—he found himself afoot. No place for sword, this, but made to order for axe. Hence, driving forward as resistlessly as though a phalanx of iron were behind him, he hewed his way toward his sovereign.

Thus he was near at hand when Phagon went down. So was doughty Sciro; and by the time the Sarlonians had learned that sword nor axe nor hammer could cut or

smash that gold-seeming armor fury personified was upon them. Tedric straddled his king's head, Sciro his feet; and, back to back, two of Lomarr's mightiest arms-masters wove circular webs of flying steel through which it was sheerest suicide to attempt to pass. Thus battle raged until the last armored foeman was down.

"Art hurt, sire?" Tedric asked anxiously as he and Sciro lifted Phagon to his feet.

"Nay, my masters-at-arms," the monarch gasped, still panting for breath. "Bruised merely, and somewhat winded." He opened his visor to let more air in; then, as he regained control, he shook off the supporting hands and stood erect under his own power. "I fear me, Tedric, that you and that vixen daughter of mine were in some sense right. Methinks I may be—Oh, the veriest trifle!—out of condition. But the battle is almost over. Did any escape?"

None had.

"'Tis well. Tedric, I know not how to honor . . ."

"Honor me no farther, sire, I beg. Hast honored me already far more than I deserved, or ever will . . . Or, at least, at the moment . . . there may be later, perhaps . . . that is, a thing . . ." he fell silent.

"A thing?" Phagon grinned broadly. "I know not whether Rhoann will be overly pleased at being called so, but 'twill be borne in mind nonetheless. Now you, Sciro; Lord Sciro now and henceforth, and all your line. Lord of what I will not now say; but when we have taken Sarlo you and all others shall know."

"My thanks, sire, and my obeisance," said Sciro.

"Schillan, with me to my pavilion. I am weary and sore, and would fain rest."

As the two Lords of the Realm, so lately commoners, strode away to do what had to be done:

"Neither of us feels any nobler than ever, I know," Sciro said, "but in one way 'tis well—very well indeed."

"The Lady Trycie, eh? The wind *does* set so, then, as I thought."

"Aye. For long and long. It wondered me often, your choice of the Lady Rhoann over *her*. Howbeit, 'twill be a wondrous thing to be your brother-in-law as well as in arms."

Tedric grinned companionably, but before he could reply they had to separate and go to work.

The king did not rest long; the heralds called Tedric in before half his job was done.

"What thinkst you, Tedric, should be next?" Phagon asked.

"First punish Devoss, sire!" Tedric snarled. "Back-track them—storm High Pass if defended—raze half the steppes with sword and torch—drive them the full length of their country and into Northern Sound!"

"Interesting, my impetuous youngblade, but not at all practical," Phagon countered. "Hast con-

sidered the matter of time—the avalanches of rocks doubtless set up and ready to sweep those narrow paths—what Taggad would be doing while we cavort through the wastelands?"

Tedric deflated almost instantaneously. "Nay, sire," he admitted sheepishly. "I thought not of any such."

"'Tis the trouble with you—you know not *how* to think." Phagon was deadly serious now. "'Tis a hard thing to learn; impossible for many; but learn it you must if you end not as Hurlo ended. Also, take heed: disobey my orders but once, as Hurlo did, and you hang in chains from the highest battlement of your own Castle Middlemarch until your bones rot apart and drop into the lake."

His monarch's vicious threat—or rather, promise—left Tedric completely unmoved. "'Tis what I would deserve, sire, or less; but no fear of that. Stupid I may be, but disloyal? Nay, sire. Your word always has been and always will be my law."

"Not stupid, Tedric, but lacking in judgment, which is not as bad; since the condition is, if you care enough to make it so, remediable. You *must* care enough, Tedric. You *must* learn, and quickly; for much more than your own life is at hazard."

The younger man stared questioningly and the king went on: "My life, the lives of my family, and the future of all Lomarr," he said quietly.

"In that case, sire, wilt learn, and quickly," Tedric declared; and, as days and weeks went by, he did.

"ALL previous attempts on the city of Sarlo were made in what seemed to be the only feasible way—crossing the Tegula at Lower Ford, going down its north bank through the gorge to the West Branch, and down that to the Sarlo." Phagon was lecturing from a large map, using a sharp stick as pointer; Tedric, Sciro, Schillan, and two or three other high-ranking officers were watching and listening. "The West Branch flows into Sarlo only forty miles above Sarlo Bay. The city of Sarlo is here, on the north bank of the Sarlo River, right on the Bay, and is five-sixths surrounded by water. The Sarlo River is wide and deep, uncrossable against any real opposition. Thus, Sarlonian strategy has always been not to make any strong stand anywhere along the West Branch, but to fight delaying actions merely—making their real stand on the north bank of the Sarlo, only a few miles from Sarlo City itself. The Sarlo River, gentlemen, is well called 'Sarlo's Shield.' It has never been crossed."

"How do you expect to cross it, then, sire?" Schillan asked.

"Strictly speaking, we cross it not, but float down it. We cross the Tegula at Upper Ford, not Lower. . . ."

"*Upper* Ford, sire? Above the

terrible gorge of the Low Umpasseurs?"

"Yea. That gorge, undefended, is passable. 'Tis rugged, but passage can be made. Once through the gorge our way to the Lake of the Spiders, from which springs the Middle Branch of the Sarlo, is clear and open."

"But 'tis held, sire, that Middle Valley is impassable for troops," a grizzled captain protested.

"We traverse it, nonetheless. On rafts, at six or seven miles an hour, faster by far than any army can march. But 'tis enough of explanation. Lord Sciro, attend!"

"I listen, sire."

"At earliest dawn take two centuries of axemen and one century of bowmen, with the wagonload of wood-workers' supplies about which some of you have wondered. Strike straight north at forced march. Cross the Tegula. Straight north again, to the Lake of the Spiders and the head of the Middle Branch. Build rafts, large enough and of sufficient number to bear our whole force; strong enough to stand rough usage. The rafts should be done, or nearly, by the time we get there."

"I hear, sire, and I obey."

Tedric, almost stunned by the novelty and audacity of this, the first amphibian operation in the history of his world, was dubious but willing. And as the map of that operation spread itself in his mind, he grew enthusiastic.

"We attack then, not from the south but from the north-east!"

"Aye, and on solid ground, not across deep water. But to bed, gentlemen — tomorrow the clarions sound before dawn!"

Dawn came. Sciro and his force struck out. The main army marched away, up the north bank of the Upper Midvale, which for thirty or forty miles flowed almost directly from the north-east. There, however, it circled sharply to flow from the south-east and the Lomarrians left it, continuing their march across undulating foothills straight for Upper Ford. From the south, the approach to this ford, lying just above (east of) the Low Umpasseur Mountains, at the point where the Middle Marches mounted a stiff but not abrupt gradient to become the Upper Marches, was not too difficult. Nor was the entrapment of most of the Sarlonians and barbarians on watch. The stream, while only knee-deep for the most part, was wide, fast, and rough; the bottom was made up in toto of rounded, mossy, extremely slippery rocks. There were enough men and horses and lines, however, so that the crossing was made without loss.

Then, turning three-quarters of a circle, the cavalcade made slow way back down the river, along its north bank, toward the forbidding gorge of the Low Umpasseurs.

The north bank was different, vastly different, from the south one. Mountains of bare rock, incredible thousands of feet higher

than the plateau forming the south bank, towered at the rushing torrent's very edge. What passed for a road was narrow, steep, full of hair-pin turns, and fearfully rugged. But this, too, was passed—by dint of what labor and stress it is not necessary to dwell upon—and as the army debouched out onto the sparsely-wooded, gullied and eroded terrain of the high barren valley and began to make camp for the night. Tedric became deeply concerned. Sciro's small force would have left no obvious or lasting traces of its passing; but such blatant disfigurements as these. . . .

He glanced at the king, then stared back at the broad, trampled, deep-rutted way the army had come. "South of the river our tracks do not matter," he said, flatly. "In the gorge they exist not. But *those* traces, sire, matter greatly and are not to be covered or concealed."

"Tedric, I approve of you—you begin to think!" Much to the young man's surprise, Phagon smiled broadly. "How wouldst handle the thing, if decision yours?"

"A couple of fives of bowmen to camp here or nearby, sire," Tedric replied promptly, "to put arrows through any who come to spy."

"'Tis a sound idea, but not enough by half. Here I leave *you;* and a full century each of our best scouts and hunters. See to it, my lord captain, that none sees this our trail from here to the Lake of the Spiders; or, having seen it, lives to tell of the seeing."

Tedric, after selecting his sharpshooters and watching them melt invisibly into the landscape, went down the valley about a mile and hid himself carefully in a cave. These men knew the business in hand a lot better than he did, and he would not interfere. What he was for was to take command in an emergency; if the operation were a complete success he would have nothing whatever to do!

He was still in the cave, days later, when word came that the launching had begun. Rounding up his guerillas, he led them at a fast pace to the Lake of the Spiders, around it, and to the place where the Lomarrian army had been encamped. Four fifty-man rafts were waiting, and Tedric noticed with surprise that a sort of house had been built on the one lying farthest down-stream. This luxury, he learned, was for him and his squire Rahlion and their horses and armor!

The Middle Branch was wide and swift; and to Tedric and his bowmen, landlubbers all, it was terrifyingly rough and boisterous and full of rocks. Tedric, however, did not stay a landlubber long. He was not the type to sit in idleness when there was something physical to do, something new to learn. And learning to be a riverman was *so* much easier than learning to be King Phagon's idea of a strategist!

Thus, stripped to clout and moc-

casins, Tedric reveled in pitting his strength and speed at steering-oar or pole against the raft's mass and the river's whim.

"A good man, him," the boss boatman remarked to one of his mates. Then, later, to Tedric himself: "'Tis shame, lord, that you got to work at this lord business. Wouldst make a damn good riverman in time."

"My thanks, sir, and 'twould be more fun, but King Phagon knows best. But this 'Bend' you talk of—what is it?"

"'Tis where this Middle Branch turns a square angle 'gainst solid rock to flow west into the Sarlo; the roughest, wickedest bit of water anybody ever tried to run a raft over. Canst try it with me if you like."

"'Twould please me greatly to try."

Well short of the Bend, each raft was snubbed to the shore and unloaded. When the first one was bare, the boss riverman and a score of his best men stepped aboard. So did Tedric.

"What folly this?" Phagon yelled. "Tedric, ashore!"

"Canst swim, Lord Tedric?" the boss asked.

"Like an eel," Tedric admitted modestly, and the riverman turned to the king.

"'Twill save you rafts, sire, if he works with us. He's quick as a cat and strong as a bull, and knows more of white water already than half my men."

"In that case . . ." Phagon waved his hand and the first raft took off.

Many of the rafts were lost, of course; and Tedric had to swim in icy water more than once, but he loved every exhausting, exciting second of the time. Nor were the broken logs of the wrecked rafts allowed to drift down the river as tell-tales. Each bit was hauled carefully ashore.

Below the Bend, the Middle Branch was wide and deep, hence the reloaded rafts had smooth sailing; and the Sarlo itself was of course wider and deeper still. In fact, it would have been easily navigable by an 80,000-ton modern liner. The only care now was to avoid discovery—which matter was attended to by several centuries of far-ranging scouts and by scores of rivermen in commandeered boats.

Moyla's Landing, the predetermined point of debarkation, was a scant fifteen miles from the city of Sarlo. It was scarcely a hamlet, but even so any one of its few inhabitants could have given the alarm. Hence it was surrounded by an advance force of bowmen and spearmen, and before those soldiers set out Phagon voiced the orders he was to repeat so often during the following hectic days.

"NO BURNING AND NO WANTON KILLING! None must know we come, but nonetheless Sarlon is to be a province of Lomarr my kingdom and *I will not have its people or its substance de-*

stroyed! To that end I swear by my royal head, by the Throne, by Great Llosir's heart and brain and liver, that any man of whatever rank who slays or burns without my express permission will be flayed alive and then boiled in oil!"

Hence the taking of Moyla's Landing was very quiet, and its people were held under close guard. All that day and all the following night the army rested. Phagon was pretty sure that Taggad knew nothing of the invasion as yet; but it would be idle to hope to get much closer without being discovered. Every mile gained, however, would be worth a century of men. Therefore, long before dawn, the supremely ready Lomarrian forces rolled over the screening bluff and marched steadily toward Sarlo. Not fast, note; thirteen miles is a long haul when there is to be a full-scale battle at the end of it.

Plodding slowly along on mighty Dreegor at the king's right, Tedric roused himself from a brown study and, gathering his forces visibly, spoke: "Knowst I love the Lady Rhoann, sire?"

"Aye. No secret that, nor has been since the fall of Sarpedion."

"Hast permission, then, to ask her to be my wife, once back in Lompoar?"

"Mayst ask her sooner than that, if you like. Wilt be here tomorrow —with the Family, the Court, and an image of Great Llosir—for the Triumph."

Tedric's mouth dropped open. "But sire," he managed finally, "how couldst be *that* sure of success? The armies are too evenly matched."

"In seeming only. They have no body of horse or foot able to stand against my Royal Guard; they have nothing to cope with you and Sciro and your armor and weapons. Therefore I have been and am certain of Lomarr's success. Well-planned and well-executed ventures do not fail. This has been long in the planning, but only your discovery of the god-metal made it possible of execution." Then, as Tedric glanced involuntarily at his gold-plated armor: "Yea, the overlay made it possible for me to live —although I may die this day, being the center of attack and being weaker and of lesser endurance that I thought—but my life matters not beside the good of Lomarr. A king's life is of import only to himself, to his Family, and to a few—wouldst be surprised to learn how *very* few—real friends."

"Your life matters to me, sire— and to Sciro!"

"Aye, Tedric my almost-son, that I know. Art in the forefront of those few I spoke of. And take this not *too* seriously, for I expect fully to live. But in case I die, remember this: kings come and kings go; but as long as it holds the loyalty of such as you and Sciro and your kind, the Throne of Lomarr endures!"

TAGGAD of Sarlon was not taken completely by surprise. However, he had little enough warning, and so violent and hasty was his mobilization that the Sarlonians were little if any fresher than the Lomarrians when they met, a couple of miles outside the city's limit.

There is no need to describe in detail the arrangement of the centuries and the legions, nor to dwell at length upon the bloodiness and savagery of the conflict as a whole nor to pick out individual deeds of derring-do, of heroism, or of cowardice. Of prime interest here is the climactic charge of Lomarr's heavy horse—the Royal Guard—that ended it.

There was little enough of finesse in that terrific charge, led by glittering Phagon and his two alloy-clad lords. The best their Middlemarch horses could do in the way of speed was a lumbering canter, but their tremendous masses—a Middlemarch warhorse was not considered worth saving unless he weighed at least one long ton—added to the weight of man and armor each bore, gave them momentum starkly irresistible. Into and through the ranks of Sarlonian armor the knights of Lomarr's Old Blood crashed; each rising in his stirrups and swinging down with all his might, with sword or axe or hammer, upon whatever luckless wight was nearest at hand.

Then, re-forming, a backward smash; then another drive forward. But men were being unhorsed; horses were being hamstrung or killed; of a sudden king Phagon himself went down. Unhorsed, but not out—his god-metal axe, scarcely stoppable by iron, was taking heavy toll.

As at signal, every mounted Guardsman left his saddle as one; and every Guardsman who could move drove toward the flashing golden figure of his king.

"Where now, sire?" Tedric yelled, above the clang of iron.

"Taggad's pavilion, of course—where else?" Phagon yelled back.

"Guardsmen, to me!" Tedric roared. "Make wedge, as you did at Sarpedion's Temple!" and the knights who could not hear him were made by signs to understand what was required. "To that purple tent we ram Phagon our King. Elbows in, sire. Short thrusts only, and never mind your legs. Now, men—*DRIVE!*"

With three giants in impregnable armor at point—Tedric and Sciro were so close beside and behind the king as almost to be one with him—that flying wedge simply could not be stopped. In little over a minute it reached the pavilion and its terribly surprised owner. Golden tigers seemed to leap and creep as the lustrous silk of the tent rippled in the breeze; magnificent golden tigers adorned the Sarlonian's purple-enameled armor.

"Yield, Taggad of Sarlon, or

die!" Phagon shouted.

"If I yield, Oh Phagon of Lomarr, what . . ." Taggad began a conciliatory speech, but even while speaking he whirled a long and heavy sword out from behind him, leaped, and struck—so fast that neither Phagon nor either of his lords had time to move; so viciously hard that had Lomarr's monarch been wearing anything but supersteel he would have joined his fathers then and there. As it was, however, the fierce-driven heavy blade twisted, bent double, and broke.

Phagon's counter-stroke was automatic. His axe, swung with all his strength and speed, crashed to the helve through iron and bone and brain; and, as soon as the heralds with their clarions could spread the news that Phagon had killed Taggad in hand to hand combat, all fighting ceased.

"Captain Sciro, kneel!" With the flat of his sword Phagon struck the steel-clad back a ringing blow. "Rise, Lord Sciro of Sarlon!"

"So be it," Skandos One murmured gently, and took up the life and the work of Skandos Four.

Ultimate catastrophe was five hundred twenty-nine years away.

THE END

Many stories have been written about the problems of dealing with alien races, of wars between mankind and bems. But maybe that won't be a serious problem after all; we'd probably have no use for planets suited to alien life-forms, our troubles may be with life-forms similar to us — oxygen-breathing bipeds, looking for Earth-type planets, like the Rumi. It's then that we'll have need for

THE WATCHERS

By Jan Smith

MAN had been happy back in his little two-by-four system. Happy but not contented. So he had invented himself a stellar drive and had burst out of his nice safe little system into a galaxy that he wasn't really ready for. A galaxy where there just wasn't enough of him to go around and where other races were on the move, some of them races that also wanted oxygen planets.

That's why there was a Space Frontier Watcher Service—just as if there could be any frontiers in space. Man was spread so wide and far between that sometimes he was only a rumor. But always out on the periphery of his empire was the Watcher Service; The Watchdogs of Space, they called us. That's why I was sprawled in front of my fire on a tiny hunk of moon they called Thirty which wound its way around a worthless molten planet named Nestrond in a system you probably never heard of on the other side of Wolfe 359.

Thirty was a small, jagged planet with just enough gravity to hang on to a breathless atmosphere, the thirtieth out among Nestrond's huge litter of moons. There were nights on Thirty when the big planet hung overhead like a bloated pumpkin, the bulges in its gaseous mass lending an impossibly grotesque appearance to its face. Sometimes I would watch it as it came peeping over the ragged edge of Thirty; it seemed so close that you held your breath for fear it would puncture itself. There were other nights when Nestrond was eclipsed by clouds of gaseous matter and by the nearer moons and then I'd lie there and listen to the stars whispering—whispering the same age old stories that were always new, the stories that lured man to Luna, then to Mars and finally right out

of the Solar System itself.

But mostly I watched the screens in my underground bunker, watched the space search radar screens and listened to the robot patrol rockets as they reported back, their mechanical voices reeling off the endless series of numbers that were their only language. Numbers that were punched into cards and fed into interpreters as fast as the information came over the hyper-wave radio.

They picked you out for this Service because your mother and father and their mothers and fathers had been Watchers. The training course was your whole life up to the time you were graduated to the tune of speeches and cheering. Then they pinned a little gold radarscope on your collar and assigned you to your first six months of lonely vigil somewhere away off from everywhere. You ate and you slept and you were bored and you were lonely but you watched.

And then one day you weren't bored anymore. You were excited and maybe just a trifle scared because the keys of the translators were pounding out a report from one of your brood of robots, a report that meant that something was coming in from outside. A fleet of somethings and a fleet could mean only one thing—a Rumi raid.

Man had managed to get along with the flying squid from Sirius, with intelligent plants on Varga but never with the Rumi. They were just too much alike. Two races of oxygen breathing bipeds in one Galaxy were about one too many.

This was why I was here on a moon in a deserted system that had been ignored by men until the Space Patrol had learned that Rumi raiders sometimes passed through it on their sporadic raids on the colonial worlds of Wolfe 359. Now they were coming and I had only to wait and watch my radar screens until they were in range, count them and press the red labeled button that activated the hyperwave General Alarm Radio, a radio buried deep in the solid granite of Thirty. A radio which would keep broadcasting even if the Rumi should blast my bunker off the face of the moon and sear it from end to end.

Then the Rumi squadron came onto my screen. Man and Rumi had fought a five year war, a war without a fleet action or a general battle. A war of slashing cruiser raids, of surprise and trap. A war of sudden raids in the night, of atomic torpedoes smashing into the hulls of ships, of men dying in suddenly airless compartments. A war of blasted frontier towns and brief, flaming battles over distant worlds. A war of attrition in which the heavy Terran battlefleet could never quite bring its full weight to bear on the light Rumi forces. It was always a city blasted here or a convoy cut to pieces someplace else.

Slowly the beeps on the screen drew closer, dividing themselves into half-a-dozen pencil-thin cruiser shapes. With a quick leap across the room I pressed the general alarm stud and started the hyperwave signals on their way. The warnings would alert every Terran cruiser squadron within range and would give the teeming cities of Asgard and Olympia a few hours notice before the disruptor bombs of the Rumi rained down on them. Then, my purpose on Thirty accomplished. I settled back to watch, my excitement fading away; fading away and then suddenly flaring up again as a seventh object came on the screen, an object that showed as a red dot which meant a Terran ship. An unarmed, private craft, for a warship would have shown as orange on the IFF screen.

The Rumi had picked up the Terran craft also, because even as I watched one of the alien cruisers peeled off and headed toward it. The Terran craft was aware of its danger now and had changed course and was heading directly toward the Nestrond system.

My eyes glued to the spacescope I watched as the two ships came within visual range. The long black Rumi cruiser with its bulging blaster turrets was closing in quickly on a small Terran Crossley 18 of a type used mostly for private yachts. I watched as the Terran ship went into what must have been a body wracking turn in a desperate attempt to throw off the cruiser. The pilot of the Crossley was good but not good enough. A disruptor beam from the raider caught the Earth ship in the port tubes and it fell away spiraling into the gravity of Thirty, with flames engulfing its after portion as it reached atmosphere.

With only a few hundred feet to spare the damaged spacer pulled out of its fall with a flare of landing rockets, slowly leveled off into a wobbly glide and headed for a fairly level plateau about twenty miles from my bunker. Then the Rumi ship was coming back, orbiting just outside atmosphere and finally plunging into it to pass over my concealed post with the heavy beat of ion rockets. The big ship filled my whole vision screen for a few moments and I would have given my ears for a pair of six-inch blasters in turret mounting. But I didn't even have as much as a side arm; Watchers were supposed to watch and warn, not fight.

The raider swept across the bow of the crippled Terran ship and poured everything she had into it at point blank range. I could see that she had been holed repeatedly but was still not finished, she had a pair of jets in action and someone at the controls who knew his business. The one thing that the automatics can't do is to set a spacer down in one piece; the intricate business of landing takes a pilot, not exactly a superman but the closest thing to homo superior in reflexes and know-how you

could find. And setting a damaged ship down on a pillar of fire with only half your jets in action just can't be done. The guy in this ship came close, though. He was at tree top level now, shaving off trees like blades of grass and splashing flame about like a Martian fire dancer, fighting the ship all the way. He just couldn't keep her level and the ship nosed over and smashed itself into a ball of smoke and flame in a dry river bed. The odds against anyone surviving that crack-up seemed overwhelming but with my scanner trained for close range I thought I saw a space-suited figure stumble, fall and then crawl away from the ship just before the fuel tanks let go with a blast that shook every instrument in my station.

The raider had swung up out of Thirty's atmosphere and was turning its nose outward but it had launched a life boat which was circling down for a landing. Those cat-faced devils never miss a trick. That landing force was to make sure that no one had survived to send a possible warning.

If those catmen thought someone had survived that crash, maybe I thought so too. My orders were very specific about not leaving my bunker and about not taking any chances of my whereabouts being discovered but something within me was just as specific about not leaving an injured human being to the Rumi's none too tender mercies. In a matter of minutes I was into my outer clothing and hurrying up the ramp from my bunker.

The cold on Thirty was unlike the cold anyplace else. It seemed to have the ability to seep its way through the thickest clothing or the stoutest walls. Even hurrying as I was through the gathering hoar frost, I could feel it creeping into my flesh. I hoped fervently that I would be back in the warmth of the bunker by the time the sun set because then it really got cold.

To travel a mile on Thirty you have to climb twenty up and down. It was hard going all the way and my breath was coming in heavy, gasping pants by the time I reached a ledge over the dry river bed in which the wrecked spacer lay. It took me only one look to see that I was too late. Beside the twisted mass of the ship sat a small gleaming object, the spaceboat from the Rumi cruiser. Six of the raiders were gathered about the space-suited figure of a human being. In a few minutes they would either have loaded the injured person into their ship and taken off or they would have done away with him. My first thought was to try to get to their ship but since it lay only a few hundred feet away from where they stood that was impossible. If I only had some sort of weapon, I thought, I would be in an ideal spot to pick them off one by one. The closest I could come to a weapon was a small pocket magnesium flare for signalling purposes.

If I was to do anything before it was too late I realized that I would have to get closer. Dropping down on my stomach, I began to crawl inch by inch down among the rocks and scrub growth toward where the Rumi were busying themselves over the supine human figure.

After ten minutes of crawling and slithering through underbrush that ripped my clothing and scratched me badly about the face, I had worked my way to within twenty feet of the Rumi. I had been careful to keep downwind of them for I wasn't sure how strong their animal sense of smell was. Certainly the musty odor of them floated down on the wind so strongly that I could make my way around them without having to risk looking until I reached what I took to be a safe spot in a clump of brush on the bank of the river almost above their heads.

When I did look I saw that the Rumi had finished taking the spacesuit off the prisoner and had gotten her—for the survivor of the Terran yacht was a girl—to her feet. Behind them I could see clearly the wreck of the Crossley with the name *Star Lady* on her bow. Even I had heard of the yacht *Star Lady* and her owner Charles Thomson, millionaire explorer. Without a doubt the girl was Thomson's daughter. The Rumi hadn't killed her immediately so they probably intended to hold her for ransom as they did so many of their prisoners.

The girl was fighting and kicking as two of the raiders dragged her back toward their ship. I knew that if I didn't act quickly they would have her aboard and far beyond any help I could give her. There was only one thing I could do and that was to delay them until I could think of some way of getting her out of their hands. If they thought there was someone else on the satellite, they might make an attempt to get me too before they left. I shoved with my foot and sent a small avalanche of rocks and gravel down into the river bed. They were after me instantly, three of them bounding along in my direction with their flamers out. By the time they had scrambled up the bank, I was crashing away into the undergrowth and out of sight. Now I knew they wouldn't leave, not without tracking me down first and I had an idea it would turn out to be quite a job. Even with their catlike ability for following a spoor, I intended to give them a run for their money and if they caught me at least one or two of them might regret it. I knew my satellite and I was confident that my training would give me an advantage over them on its rugged surface. If I could get them to split up, the odds against me might even come down a little.

Running, climbing, crawling, I kept them always upwind of me and always the sickening big cat

odor warned me that they weren't far behind, that big cat odor that anyone who has ever visited a zoo or lion farm is familiar with. Occasionally when I stopped to catch a few breaths I would hear them pounding along tirelessly and I would be on my feet again and plunging ahead.

A few hours before it was time for the sun to set, they split up. We had been crossing one of the few level spots on the planet, a great stretch of grassland. The tall, hardy grass reached almost over my head. The Rumi were a good bit taller than I, so much taller in fact that I could see their heads above the grass when they still could not see me. I watched them split up in an attempt to cut me off from the hills which they took to be my destination. Half an hour after they split up, I killed the first of them and doubled back in the direction of the river bed. Now I had a weapon, one of those deadly Rumi heat rays called flamers. They wear them strapped to their forepaws because of their lack of a grasping hand. As I put on an extra burst of speed I wasn't much worried about the other two. They had gotten well off the scent in their attempt to head me off and by the time they realized that they had lost me, night would have closed in and I didn't put much store in the ability of those jungle cats to survive a night on Thirty. There were still three of them left back at the wreck and they would either have returned to their lifeboat or made a camp—I hoped it would be the latter.

My luck was still holding for when I reached the river bed I found them huddled about a fire in the shelter of the wrecked Terran ship. An officer and two others made perfect targets against the firelight but I couldn't fire because the figure of the girl sat in the circle of light near them. With such an unfamiliar and widely destructive weapon, I would be almost certain to cut her down as well as her captors.

Once more I took advantage of a downwind position to work my way around their camp and in among the wreckage of the *Star Lady*. The feel of the magnesium flare in my pocket had given me an idea. If I could just panic them and spread them out where the girl wouldn't be in my line of fire, I would have a good chance of picking them off. As silently as possible I climbed up on what remained of the fore section of the craft and dragged myself to a spot that was almost directly over their heads. In the leaping light of the fire, I looked almost squarely into the narrow, fur-covered faces of the raiders and could also see the pale, pretty face of the girl framed in blond hair. Quietly but with my heart pounding, I edged forward even closer—I had to be close—I couldn't afford to miss. If any of them looked up now they couldn't miss seeing me. Slowly I worked

the flare out of my pocket and let it roll off the edge of the wreck. An intense white light shot upward temporarily blinding the Rumi. Two of them did just what I had hoped, they stumbled off in the direction of their lifeboat. The officer did what I had hoped they wouldn't do, he grabbed the girl and pulled her back out of the light.

Even with that strange weapon, I knew I couldn't miss those two running Rumi. I cut them down with three quick blasts and then slid quickly from the top of the ship as the officer poured a stream of fire at me, fire that splashed and roared over my head. As I fell to the ground, I caught a quick glimpse of the girl. She had broken away from her captor and was darting into the undergrowth. He sent one burst of flame after her and then had to leap for cover as I sent a steady stream of fire in his direction. Then I was running, dodging and twisting behind boulders and rocks and firing as I ran until my gun clicked empty. I cursed myself for having forgotten to take the extra clips of ammo from the creature I had killed. As my quarry almost got my range, I plunged headlong into some brush and lay for a minute getting my bearings in the rapidly fading light from the flare. Carefully now and with more deliberate air, the Rumi tried to burn me. As quietly as I could I moved toward him in the heavy undergrowth. The light was almost gone and I didn't think that even his cat eyes would be much good in the ebony dark Thirty night. I could smell him, clearly in my nose was that musty smell and no matter how still he might lie or how silently he might creep about on those padded feet of his, I could follow him. I stalked him in the darkness and he knew he was being stalked. He blazed away at every shadow, at every bush that moved in the cold wind that whistled along the river bed.

He was afraid now and his scent was stronger. Then he was running, trying to get to the lifeboat and I was after him. He was stumbling and sobbing now, occasionally turning to fire back along the way he had come. But I had already bounded around ahead of him and was coming in to attack. He turned, his paw with the flamer darting upward. He was quick but not quick enough. My hurtling body struck him before the gun could fire and we went down in a struggling heap. The Rumi rolled over trying to regain his feet but he couldn't break my grip. The heat gun had fallen into the undergrowth and he was trying desperately to recover it and to fight me off at the same time. Unable to find the gun he turned his full attention to me.

We fought body to body, the musky smell of him almost choking me at such close quarters. At the same time it sent a hot flood of rage surging through me. He clawed vainly for the knife in his

belt. He was big and had the muscles of a wildcat but he had evolved too far up the scale of evolution for a battle of fang and claw. I found his throat and he screamed wildly like the big jungle cats his ancestors had been, screamed and thrashed about until I found his jugular vein. Then he lay still and his cat blood was all over me.

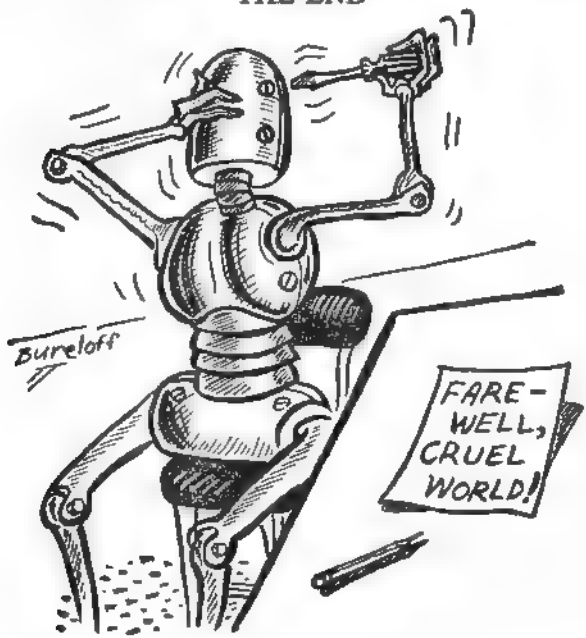
A few hours later I found the girl. She had been running in circles for hours and had finally settled down near a small fire she had started with a Rumi flamer. She was all hunched over with her arms wrapped about her as I stepped out into the circle of light. I came as near to dying then as I had at any time that night.

Miss Thomson screamed at first sight of me and her heat gun leaped upward. I saw her finger tighten on the firing pin—then she relaxed and ran toward me.

"Thank God! You're not a raider, are you? Come here, doggie! Nice doggie!"

I nuzzled her hand as she patted my head. Later I might tell her that I came from a race of mutant dogs with I.Q.'s in the 200's, developed by man to aid him in guarding the far boundaries of his space frontiers . . . later I might tell her all about the watchdogs of space . . . but right now I felt like having my ears scratched.

THE END



ALIEN INVASION

By Marcia Kamien

PAIN gripped Riva, pain worse than anything she had ever experienced before. It's true, she thought, it's all true. But her mind shrank away from the thought, leaving her a blank, save for the terrible pain.

Two doctors entered the room silently and when one of them spoke to her, it was with a start of surprise that she opened her eyes and saw, instead of a red wall of hurt, their kind faces, and beyond them, the window looking out upon the calm countryside.

"Riva," the doctor said, "tell me every time there is a pain."

"It's true, then. . . ." she whispered. The doctor nodded; and she whimpered a little. "But—*how? Why?*" The face above her where she lay on the hospital bed was still kind, but there was no answer in the eyes. Riva turned her head away.

How had it happened? Nine months before she had felt a strange sensation inside her, in the night. She had thought nothing of it. And then, the lump growing in her abdomen, growing steadily. But she, an unmarried woman, an intelligent scientist with no emotional ties . . .

However, there *was* life in her womb, life that would not be ignored . . . Life that squirmed and kicked inside her and demanded care. She had gone to the doctor; there were many tests. And then the gentle voice of the medical man, saying:

"And you're sure you have had no—ah—romantic interludes?"

"Absolutely positive!" she had snapped.

"In that case . . ." and his hands moved out expressively. ". . . I have no explanation for the fact that you will give birth in three or four months."

And that had been that. Now here she was in a Maternity Hospital waiting for *whatever it was* to be born. As she grimaced with pain and nodded to the waiting doctor, she turned her thoughts away from the horror that the child within her might not be a . . . *child.*

* * *

"YOU must be awake. *Answer me.*" The voice was strange, cold, foreign.

Riva shuddered beneath the blankets and turned her face away from the voice. It would not be denied. "You can't escape me, Riva. Answer." She raised her head, but there was no one in the room. She looked around wildly.

"You can't see me."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who we are right now. The child lives?" It wasn't until then that she turned to look into the basket by her bed. Then she screamed.

"Hush, Riva," the voice commanded, but it was gentler now. "Tell me about the child. It lives, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Yes, it lived, it breathed . . . but half *monster!* "How?" she whispered in agony.

"We are a scientifically advanced world. And we have ways. But a dying world, Riva. Strange diseases, taking our women from us. Terrible heat, burning our food, our live-stock.

"This is an experiment," the voice continued. We cannot breathe your air. But a child, a mixture of your lungs and our lungs, might be able to survive. A child with our instincts. Do you understand?"

Riva nodded, then said: "Yes." She was beginning to understand. Aliens, coming to her world, in the form of their monster children. To take over this world.

"To take over," she murmured aloud, clenching her fists.

"No, Riva," the voice said, calmly and almost soft, "we don't want to take over. But a world that has gone so far, done so much, been so —good. Ah, Riva, ours is a world which must not entirely die and be lost. We nova shortly. When you look up at the sky you will see us, burning like a bright, brief flame. And then we will be gone to eternity." The voice stopped for an instant and Riva thought, wonderingly, he speaks like a poet, this alien. He feels so strongly, but so gently.

"We will try to send books and films by rocket, but we can only guess if they will survive . . ." Again the alien broke off his train of thought and added, more briskly, "The child, Riva, is it female?"

She looked.

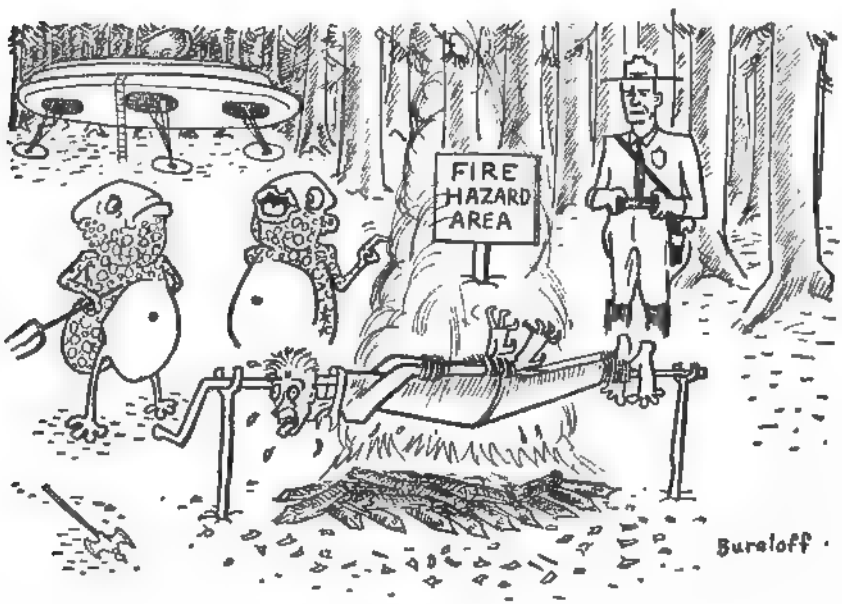
"Yes."

There was a sigh of relief. "Riva, there is not much time . . . Please listen to me. We chose you because of your intelligence. Because you would listen and perhaps, understand a little. *She* is not so different from you. Look at her closely and love her. You will love her, because she is yours." Then, he added, "And mine, Riva. I am a great scientist. She will be very intelligent."

She was calmer now. The voice was still soft, calm and — she thought — intelligent. She knew they would try this again, now; and that her own people would destroy these poor little creatures as soon as they were born, or maybe before. In the meantime, she would converse with the alien. As a scientist, she owed her people the information. And now she felt almost exhilarated, and listened quietly while the alien man spoke to her and, later, left.

Then she turned and looked the infant over carefully. The poor thing was a mixture. It had her hair, her eyes . . . but the mouth was misshapen and there was an arm missing and the skin was like the belly of a dead animal, so pale and colorless it was.

The doctor walked in and smiled, seeing her so calm.



It seems we're breaking some sort of local taboo.

"Ah, then everything is peaceful." He glanced at the basket and cleared his throat carefully. "I must admit," he started, "I was amazed—"

"Aliens," she said shortly, "I don't know how they do it, but they could be stopped. I speak to one of them. I'll find out. They must be very intelligent."

The doctor touched the baby with a careful finger. "Poor deformed thing," he muttered. "You will try to forget this, Riva. We'll have it destroyed, now that these—aliens—have made contact." He touched the child again.

Riva said nothing, looking down at the baby.

"Did they say who they are?" the doctor asked.

Riva looked at the infant, then the doctor, and took a deep breath.

"Do not destroy that child."

The doctor's head came up with a jerk.

"No," she insisted. "That child is mine. Anyone else may do as they wish; I shall take a chance. Perhaps . . . perhaps, she will be much like her—father."

The doctor stared at her. He spluttered. "Of course . . . you're right . . . of course . . ."

Riva smiled at him a little.

"Yes," she said, addressing the baby in the basket. "I shall take a chance on you, little Half-One, on you and your world. And I shall call you by the name your father called himself. A strange name, but yours."

Riva's hand was soft on the infant's head.

"I name you," she said, ignoring the doctor, "Earthman." Then, she added, "And may you love the planet your father called Venus as much as I."

"I wish you'd stop bringing your work home with you!"

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